

DR. RUTH'S ROMANCE

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Copeland Harbour was an isolated company town along the Louisiana Coast; it subsisted largely as a result of the local shrimp packing plant and its score or more employees.

For Dr. Ruth Prescott, fleeing an unhappy romance and eager to get as far away from Grace Memorial Hospital as possible, it promised a perfect haven. She, therefore, welcomed the chance to replace the retiring general practitioner of the Harbour and to minister to the needs of the bayou people.

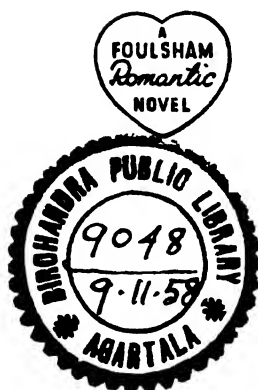
But she found that a mere change of residence was no guarantee of tranquillity. The town's old settlers resented the upstart lady doctor; her attempts to bring progress to the village were met by rebuffs and the boycott of her services. Even Len Hudson, a comparative newcomer to the Harbour too, but already accepted by the local citizenry, could help only up to a certain point.

The moving love story of a physician in petticoats.

DR. RUTH'S ROMANCE

By
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"City Nurse", "Magic in May"
etc.



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CHAPTER ONE

DR. RUTH PRESCOTT settled her filmy grey chiffon skirts deftly about her slender body, loving the delicate fluff of coral pink in the lining of the wide, floating sash. Two hours ago she had been in Surgery doing an emergency, intent, absorbed in her job. But now she looked as airily feminine as any social butterfly, and the thought made her smile.

The apartment was warm and bright with the steady, thin beat of a sleety February rain against the windows. She touched the tall silver vase of red roses. They had been an extravagance, she told herself, just as the silver-grey gown with its unexpected touch of coral had been. But tonight David would be back! David would be home!

Colour tinged her cheeks as she realized that she thought of this place, her apartment, as David's home. But then, poor darling, he had never had a home, except the orphanage where he had grown up. David's home, she told herself warmly, was in her heart, and her home was anywhere in the world David wanted to be. She asked only that he should want her there with him.

For a moment a touch of chill crept over her as though one of the windows had suddenly opened. For David had never told her in so many words that he loved her. It had all been there between them, though. She had never made any secret of

how she felt about him, not since that first night when he had been brought into the hospital, critically injured in a taxicab smash-up.

That had been almost two years ago. She had been a senior interne at Grace Memorial and she had stayed on twenty-four-hour duty with him for the first period after his stay in Surgery. From the very first time he had roused faintly to look up at her, something had happened in her heart; that carefully controlled, coolly composed heart that had never wanted anything but to make her a fine doctor! How it had danced and quivered, like some child's toy on a string, as the weeks had passed and David had fought his way back to life!

He was a geologist, and when he was able to return to the pursuit of his profession, he had been sent by his company to South America for a stay of six months to a year. She would never forget the night he had said good-bye to her.

They had had dinner together, and she had driven him to the airport. And there in her car, while the great silver-winged plane loaded, he had held her hands very close and had bent above her, and his voice had been husky with emotion.

"I have no right to say anything to you now, Ruth dear," he had told her, "not just before hopping off on a jaunt like this. But when I come back—just you wait!"

"I will, David; oh, I will," she had promised him tremulously, and had given him her mouth to kiss, her arms holding him closely.

Then, with tears dimming her eyes, she had

watched the great silver-winged bird lift effortlessly into the air and vanish into the midnight sky.

But tonight he would be home. Any minute now there would be the sound of the door-bell, and she would open the door and David would be standing there! Her heart rose smotheringly in her throat at the picture.

Suddenly, the sound she had been listening for came, and she stood rigid, shaking so that she could not move to answer the bell's summons. It was repeated before she pulled herself free of the breathless paralysis, moved to the door and swung it open.

For a moment she could only stand there, clinging to the door-frame, looking up at him. Tall and rangy and rugged-looking, very tired and strained, she realized in that first breathless moment.

For a moment they only looked at each other, until a faint, tremulous smile touched Ruth's unsteady mouth and she said softly, "Well, hi, there! Welcome home!"

"Hi, yourself," David laughed, and stepped into the apartment. "I'd forgotten it could rain like that—sleet and a bitter wind that seems trying to cut you in two. But I enjoyed battling with it."

"You must have. You're soaked. Let me have your coat," she urged warmly. "Doesn't it rain in the tropics? I seem to have heard that it does."

"Oh, sure, but a warm, muggy lifeless sort of rain that just moulds your bones and makes you wish you didn't have to move a finger!" laughed

David. "A night like this makes a fellow step lively and enjoy it."

"Make yourself comfortable," Ruth called to him as she moved toward the bathroom to hang his overcoat and hat on the shower rod above the tub. "I'll get the drinks."

When she came back a few minutes later, he was prowling the room, a frown drawing his brows together, his darkly tanned face strained.

"You don't look very well, David. A rugged job?" she asked, as she handed him a cocktail.

"Oh, not much." He shrugged and dropped into a chair across from her. "About the usual."

"Oh, well, you'll have a vacation and get the tropical bugs out of your bloodstream up here in the cold and have a chance to build yourself up—" she began happily.

"I'm afraid I won't, Ruth. I go back tomorrow," David told her quietly.

Ruth's cocktail splashed a few drops on her gown, and she was too startled to be aware of it.

"Oh, *no*, David. Why, you were supposed to have six months leave when you finished the job!" she protested.

"I know, but that's all been changed." David avoided her eyes. "Matter of fact, we're opening up a new field. I was instrumental in discovering it, and naturally, I want a hand in putting it into operation."

"Well, of course, but, David—*tomorrow!*" she wailed. "Surely you could wait a week, a few days!"

"I'm afraid not, Ruth." David was turning his

untouched cocktail round and round between his fingers, his eyes on the pale golden liquid. "I only came up because—well, to be honest with you, I owe you such a lot."

"That's nonsense. You owe me nothing," she flashed, hurt and puzzled by his manner.

"Not even for saving my life?" His smile was faint, his eyes steady. "I don't suppose that means a lot to a doctor as skilful and competent as you are, because it's more or less routine. But it's the only life I have and—well, it seems pretty important, especially now."

"I only did what any competent doctor would have done, and I think your life is very important indeed! Just about the most important thing in the world." The words burst from her almost without her conscious volition, and she was startled to see a slow, dark red creep under his sun-bronze.

"When I left here a year ago," he began slowly, awkwardly as though he found it very hard to fit the words to his tongue, "you and I had a sort of understanding, I know. But something has happened these last months that—well, that I'm afraid is going to upset that understanding."

An icy hand seemed to close about Ruth's eager, quivering heart, and she very carefully put the cocktail glass on the low table before her and as carefully wiped the tips of her fingers before she spoke.

"Are you trying to tell me, David, that you don't love me?" She forced herself to speak coolly, almost as though her interest were detached and remote, and when she saw the flash of relief in

his eyes that told her she had given him the opening he was looking for, she had to set her teeth hard in her lower lip to control its trembling.

From somewhere deep within her she was able to gather together some few shreds of her pride, that lifted her head and made her smoke-grey eyes cool.

"Really, David, how absurd can you be?" There was a teasing note in her voice, that held a faint sting of anger. "Did you think I honestly believed you *were* in love with me?"

"But I thought—that is——" he began awkwardly.

"My poor dear! Don't you know that every female patient imagines herself in love with her doctor? And that a woman doctor would be very insulted if her masculine patients didn't deceive themselves in the same way? It's all a part of the cure! Didn't you know that, David?"

The depth of relief in his eyes, his obvious deep desire to believe her was in itself a bitter humiliation.

"No, I didn't," he admitted. He smiled, and the smile relieved the haggard look of strain in his face. "I do admire you and respect you——"

"Well, I should hope so!" The raillery in her voice was harsh.

"It's just that—well, when I left here a year ago it was with every intention of demanding that I be given an assignment this time to some place I'd dare take a woman like you. That I would come back and ask you to marry me. Oh, I knew even then you'd probably laugh in my face, and I fully realized how presumptuous it was of me

to expect you to give your career and all you've worked for, just to go off to some wilderness with me—or even to think you would want to.”

“Well, you can forget that, David. Since you don't want me to, there's no point in our discussing it, is there?” Her voice was controlled but thin and harsh.

David eyed her uncertainly.

“I suppose not,” he admitted uneasily. “But I felt I had to come and see you, talk things over with you——”

“You came all the way up here just to tell me that you don't want to marry me? David, how very unnecessary!” she drawled.

Again that dark, uncomfortable red crawled under his suntan and his eyes fell away from hers.

“Oh, I can see now what an unmitigated fool I've been all along,” he admitted ruefully. “It was just that—well, telling you I was going to be married was something I felt I didn't want to write.”

Ruth took that savage blow on her naked heart and felt that her whole body rocked with its force. But she managed somehow to steady her voice, to say politely, as though her interest were detached and mild, “Oh, you're engaged? To some lovely, flashing-eyed *señorita* with night-black hair and a marvellous way with the *maracas*, of course.”

David shook his head soberly.

“She is the daughter of a missionary, born and brought up down there. No, she's not beautiful—except to me. In fact, I suppose to some people

she would seem downright plain. But to me, because she is gentle and good and kind, she seems the loveliest creature in the world."

"I'm very glad for your sake, David. She sounds an ideal wife for a man in your profession," Ruth told him steadily, brown-gold head high, grey eyes cool and steady. "I'm sure you'll both be very happy. I sincerely hope so. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course, and I'm very grateful, Ruth. Grateful for everything. I'll never forget you, Ruth. Never!"

She laughed, a tinkling laugh like broken glass.

"Oh, nonsense, of course you will! But you must bring your wife to call on me when you are in the States again! And now I'm afraid, David, I shall have to ask you to go. I have a patient I must look in on before midnight. Sorry I can't ask you to stay for dinner."

"I couldn't, anyway. I have a lot to do before taking the plane in the morning."

He accepted his coat and hat from her, and in the open doorway he looked down at her gravely, soberly.

"Thanks, Ruth, for everything——" he began.

Ruth could not keep back the words that fought their way upward from her throat.

"But most of all for making it easy for you to tell me that you don't love me? That you never did? And that marrying me was the last thing in your mind? You're welcome, David. You're very welcome."

For just a moment David hesitated, looking

down at her, his blue eyes worried and uneasy. And then as though he realized the futility of more words, he turned and strode down the corridor to the elevator.

Standing there listening, she heard his footsteps die into silence, and the clang of the elevator door closing behind him was the most desolately final sound she had ever heard. She felt that she would hear it echoing down the empty corridors of her heart for all time.

CHAPTER TWO

DR. BLAKE studied her curiously as she sat across the desk from him, crisply efficient in her hospital whites, her brown-gold head high.

"But, Ruth, why on earth do you want to give up your work here to go and bury yourself in some lonely wilds like Copeland Harbour?" he puzzled aloud. "From all I can learn about it, you'd go out of your mind there in a few weeks. A lonely isolated spot out of touch with the whole world——"

"Dr. Blake, there are people there." She steadied her voice. "Their doctor, after forty-six years of devoted service to them, has died. The nearest doctor is forty miles away. There are no roads, of course; not as we know roads! A jeep can travel them; but contact with the outside world is by means of a supply-and-mail boat that comes once a week. Do you know of any spot where a doctor is needed more?"

"Well, of course, Ruth if you're sure this is what you want," Dr. Blake agreed reluctantly. "You are released and I'll recommend you—but with great reluctance."

"Thank you, Dr. Blake. That's very flattering," Ruth stood up and put her hand in his, smiling as she took her leave.

Late in the afternoon, when she went into the staff dining-room for a coffee-break, Marcia Hancock, ample and impressive in her stiffly starched

white uniform, waved to her from a table in a far corner.

Ruth brought her coffee and sat down across from Marcia, wishing devoutly that she could have avoided this interview, yet knowing she could not. When she had first entered the hospital as a scared young interne, Marcia, superintendent of nursing, had befriended her and they had developed a close attachment. She was going to miss Marcia sorely.

"What's all this the grapevine tells me about you leaving Grace Memorial to take up private practice in some backwoods area?" demanded Marcia with her usual forthrightness.

Ruth shrugged slightly.

"Oh, I just feel I'd like to have a more varied experience——" she began, but Marcia's large hand waved her to silence.

"Shush!" she ordered sternly. "This is me, Marcia, remember? Your old pal and buddy! To me, my girl, you tell the sober truth."

Ruth could not meet the kind, shrewd eyes.

"Then let's just say that I want to get away; a change of scene——" Her voice stuck in her throat and she set her teeth hard in her full lower lip.

Marcia asked very gently, "It's David, isn't it?"

Ruth bit hard on her lip and blinked to control the tears.

"Have I really been as transparent as that?" she whispered huskily.

"Only to me, darling," said Marcia gently. "Only to me! He's back, isn't he?"

"He was. He's gone again. And that's just it——"

nothing happened. No, that's not quite true; a lot happened. He met somebody else." The words stumbled out in small, shaken gasps, and Marcia's eyes warmed with pity and understanding.

"That's rough, darling. Plenty rough," she said at last. "But after all, the world hasn't come to an end. Oh, sure, I know you feel it has now. But six months, a year from now, you will have forgotten the colour of his eyes."

For a moment they were both silent, and then the silence was broken by a voice that called from the loudspeaker, "Calling Dr. Prescott. Dr. Prescott, please. You're wanted in Surgery."

"On the double, of course," said Marcia as Ruth rose swiftly. "Have dinner with me tonight and we'll take this up."

"You have dinner with me. I've a lot of packing to do," Ruth called over her shoulder as she moved out of the room, with the swift step that carried her fast but that did not look to the uninitiated as though she were hurrying.

Marcia watched her go, and then she sighed heavily and stood up. She was going to miss Ruth and she hated to see her go. But being a woman, she could understand how necessary it seemed to Ruth to remove herself from scenes that would always carry for her a poignant memory.

CHAPTER THREE

RUTH stood in the bow of the clumsy, flat-bottomed old ferry as it nosed its awkward way along the shore-line. It was all strange and somehow weird to her, as she saw the big, gnarled old cypress trees, their exposed roots deep in the water along the shore; here and there flights of long-legged birds, frightened by the chug-chugging of the old boat took flight and were briefly outlined against the cloudless, late afternoon sky that was so blue the eyes ached beholding it.

"Soon be there, Doctor," said the fat, elderly captain, removing his pipe to spit into the turgid yellow water. "Right around that next bend in the trees, you can see the platform."

Ruth turned to him, puzzled.

"The platform?" she repeated.

"Well, reckon most folks would call it a dock," he admitted, grinning and showing tobacco-stained teeth. "But it's where the shrimp boats unload and they spread the shrimp to dry in the sun. Them that's going to be salted and dried and shipped overseas. The ones that's going to be cooked and frozen and packed for shipment here in this country are unloaded directly into the packing plant."

"I see," said Ruth politely, and somehow felt her spirits drop still lower.

But she reminded herself stoutly that she was

dispirited only because she was so tired. It had been a long journey from New York; the flight to Tampa first and then the slow, tortuous journey aboard this coast-wise steamer that was little more than a ferry that carried supplies to the small settlements along the coast. They had already stopped at three of them to unload supplies; and she thought she had never seen more lonely, more isolated spots in all her imagination. The women were thin, gaunt, brown as old leather, their limp cotton dresses sodden with perspiration, their bare heads sun-bleached so that they all seemed blonde. The men were in rough work-clothes, their gnarled, brown hands reaching eagerly for the limp mail sack that the captain had handed out to them. Would Copeland Harbour be like this, she wondered?

"There she is, Doctor," said the captain, and Ruth looked up to see that the ferry had rounded a bend in the shore-line, where the trees seemed to thrust out like pointing fingers into the water.

Ahead of her in the dying afternoon sunlight, she could see a gaunt, rickety-looking wooden platform thrusting out into the water; beyond it, where it reached the shore, she saw a cluster of sun-bleached buildings that were little more than shacks, the sunlight dancing on the corrugated iron roofs. It was like pictures she had seen of native settlements in the African Congo, or along some fabled river in South America. It seemed absurd to remember that only this morning she had left New York, and it had been snowing!

The ferry angled its way cautiously in toward

the long wooden platform, and now she could see the cluster of people waiting for it, as there had been clusters at each of the other stops the ferry had made.

The captain, eyeing her momentarily unguarded face, grinned wryly.

"I was afraid you wasn't going to find it what you expected, Doc," he said quietly. "I'll be back a week from today and you can go back with me if you want."

Ruth pulled herself together and said curtly, "Thanks, Captain, but I gave Mr. Copeland my word I'd stay a year at least. I won't be going back with you."

By now the boat had reached the end of the dock, and the captain flung the stout rope out, and two men caught it and wound it about a giant pole driven into the water, to which an end of the dock had been chained.

The people on the dock were greeting the captain with friendly shouts, and as the gang-plank slid down, two of the men came aboard.

"Well, here she is, folks." The captain waved a friendly, ham-like hand toward Ruth. "Your new Doc. Doc, this is Jabez Marshall and Bert Bowles, the Harbour's two leading citizens. Did Copeland Harbour have a Mayor and a Town Council, these two would be them."

The two men, tall, well built, in their late fifties, dressed in spotlessly clean khaki, took off wide-brimmed hats and greeted Ruth with friendly courtesy.

"We're mighty proud you could come, Miss—

that is, Doctor," said Jabez. "Mr. Copeland wrote us he was sending us a lady doc, but he didn't tell us he was sending us such a pretty young one."

"I had my hands full to keep the folks down the line from kidnapping her," said the captain breezily. "Docs are few and far between in these parts, but pretty young women are even more so."

"You are all very kind and very flattering," said Ruth briskly. "But I hope you will look on me as a doctor and not as a pretty woman."

Bert, lifting one of her suitcases, while Jabez took the other, grinned bashfully at her.

"Reckon it'll be kinda hard not to look on you as both, Doc, ma'am," he said frankly. "This way, ma'am."

As she followed him down the gangplank, the people clustered close and watched her with avid eyes. From the top of her brown-gold head, crowned with a tiny, silly hat, to the tips of her lizard-skin pumps, they took her in, missing nothing of the well-cut pale grey suit, the crisp white blouse; all the sleek, smart elegance.

On the dock, Jabez said, "Folks, here she is. Dr. Ruth Prescott. We sure are going to have to work mighty hard, I'm afraid to keep her. So everybody's got to mind his p's and q's!"

A plump, middle-aged woman in a neat percale house dress came forward, her brown face warm with friendliness.

"I'm right proud you could come, Doctor Prescott. I only hope you'll be with us a long time. I'll do my best to make you comfortable. I run the boarding-house, and I've fixed you up quarters I



hope you'll like. If you don't, we'll do everything we can to fix things more to your liking. I'm Maude Elliott."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Elliott."

"Oh, shucks, honey, call me Maude same as everybody else does," Maude protested, smiling. "Makes me almighty uncomfortable when folks call me Mrs. Elliott."

"Then I shall surely call you Maude, and thank you," said Ruth smiling.

"You boys bring the luggage," said Maude. "Come this way, Miss—I mean, Doctor."

At the left of the platform, jutting out from the shore, there was a long, shed-like building, open on two sides, and Ruth caught a glimpse of machinery, of long tables and benches.

"That's the packing plant," Maude explained as she walked beside Ruth along the wide, white-sand road beneath giant live-oak trees whose long festoons of Spanish moss swayed gently in an almost imperceptible breeze. "The fleet'll be in maybe tomorrow and then things'll start humming there."

Across from the packing plant, the Harbour's business district stretched inland. There was a big general store, a small café, two or three smaller shops, and that was all.

At the end of the road, a gaunt two-storied house built of timbers that had long since bleached to the colour of silver stood facing them. A wide verandah ran across the front and down one side; a matching verandah for the second story held more old-fashioned slat-bottomed

rockers. A slat-fence ran around the property, and there were huge bushes of flowering shrubs and bright-hued beds of flowers.

Maude pushed open the gate and pointed to a sign, brand-new and neatly lettered, fastened to a post beyond the gate.

"Dr. Ruth Prescott," it read. "Office hours, 10-12 and 4-6."

"We didn't know what kind of office hours you'd want to hold, but them was the hours Dr. Ed had, and folks all around the whole community is used to 'em. You can change 'em if you like, of course. We just wanted to have everything as ready for you as we could," Maude explained anxiously. "You see, Dr. Prescott, you'll be the only doctor in 'bout forty miles, and we sure do want you to be happy and to stay; that's if you can make up your mind you can stand it."

"I promised Mr. Copeland I'd stay for at least a year," Ruth assured her.

Maude's plump, brown face was touched with a warm smile.

"Well, now if you stay a year, I reckon we can count on you to stay longer," she beamed. "Dr. Ed come here to get over pneumonia. Didn't have the slightest idea he'd stay more'n a few months; but he stayed forty-two years!"

Soberly she added, "Reckon there wasn't any man anywhere who had more friends when he died than Dr. Ed. Folks came from miles and miles around. He was a mighty fine man, Dr. Ed was."

"I'm sure he must have been," said Ruth

quietly. "I can't hope to do as well as he did, but I promise I'll do my best."

"Well, now, of course you will, Miss—I mean, Doctor," said Maude happily as they climbed the steps and crossed the porch to the big front door that stood wide open.

Inside the big hall, that ran through the house from the front door to the back, she opened a door on the left and stood aside, saying hospitably, "This is your office. Your reception room, and then your office there, and that little room Dr. Ed always used as an examining room. Your bedroom is upstairs."

Everything was neat and clean, shabby and old; but there were bowls of flowers around the entire suite. And the windows were floor-length, wide open to the garden outside and the swamp beyond.

Maude led the way up the stairs and to a room that looked out over the road and to the Harbour beyond. It was a large room, immaculately clean and tidy.

"I see the boys have brought up your luggage," said Maude. "You'll want to unpack. Would you like my daughter Cathy to come and help you?"

"Oh, no, thanks, I can attend to it myself."

"Then I'll leave you. I've got to get supper started. It'll be ready at six," said Maude. At the door she turned to say gravely, her eyes warm and friendly, "We can't begin to tell you, Doctor Prescott, how good it is to have a doctor again. These six months without one have been—well, scarey!"

"I can imagine." Ruth was honestly touched. "I only hope I can be all that you have a right to expect."

"Oh, we're none us of worried about that. Of course, a woman doctor's going to seem kind of strange to us at first, but you mustn't mind that," Maude assured her earnestly, and went away.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE came down the stairs a little before six, cool and fresh in a voile dress that was vastly becoming and that left her arms and her throat bare.

The door of her office was open, and she paused to see a man coming out of the examining room. A tall, rugged unhandsome man in the same sort of khaki garments that seemed to be the customary garb for the male population of Copeland Harbour.

"How do you do?" she asked crisply. "Are you looking for Dr. Prescott?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact I was. Are you her nurse?" asked the man, his eyes filled with a lively appreciation of her fresh loveliness.

"I'm Dr. Prescott."

Startled, the man's eyes widened and his eyebrows went up.

"Oh, good heavens no!" he protested sharply, in such obvious disbelief that Ruth felt a twinge of resentment. "You can't be! You're much too young and much too pretty!"

Ruth's head was high and her eyes frosty.

"Mr. Copeland seemed quite satisfied with my qualifications, I assure you."

"He would! He's so anxious to get a doctor here." The man broke off and grinned, abashed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm sure you're perfectly qualified and all that; a very fine doctor. But you couldn't possibly put

up with us here and the people here shouldn't have to go through the ordeal of choosing—or *finding*, because the choice is somewhat restricted, to put it mildly—a new doctor every few months.”

“I agreed to stay for a minimum of one year,” Ruth told him curtly.

He perched on the broad arm of a huge old leather chair and apparently settled down to argument.

“I'm sure you meant it, too,” he answered gently. “But now that you've seen the place; now that you see how isolated we are; how little amusement the place offered; the pleasureless life you will lead—no woman as young and pretty as you are could possibly be expected to endure it. You'll want to leave, probably the next time the supply boat comes, and who could blame you?”

“I gave Mr. Copeland my word——” Her tone was freezing.

“I know, and you'll break your heart trying to keep it, but why should a woman as young and pretty as you, a properly qualified doctor, want to come to such a place as this? Granted, of course, that you had no idea what it was really like. You couldn't have been lured by the ‘romance of the tropics’—if you were, my dear, you were misinformed! If you are here because of—oh, say an unhappy love affair——”

Ruth caught her breath and for a moment anger flamed in her face.

“How dare you?” she grated through her teeth.

“It's the only explanation I can think of for your being here.”

Ruth carefully counted to ten under her breath before she could trust herself to speak.

"May I point out to you that *why* I am here is none of your business?" she asked through her teeth.

The man's smile was disarming but his eyes remained grave.

"As the unofficial mayor of the Harbour, and its self-elected spokesman, I'm afraid it is," he said quietly. "Only, of course, as it affects the possibility of your not staying——"

"You need have no concern about that! I'm staying!"

Maude came along the hall, saw them and beamed happily.

"Oh, hello, Len. I see you and Dr. Prescott have met," she said cheerfully.

The man's grin deepened, and there was a teasing twinkle in his dark eyes.

"Not only met, but clashed, Maudie, my love," he drawled. "I expressed a doubt of her ability to 'take' the Harbour, and she resented it."

"Now, Len, don't you go quarrelling with Dr. Prescott, darn you!" protested Maude anxiously. "At least let her get unpacked and settled before you start banging away at her. What are you trying to do, drive her away?"

Ruth was angry but trying to control her temper.

"If he is, Maude, he's wasting his time" she said evenly. "I came to stay at least a year and, unofficial mayor or not, he isn't going to drive me away."

"Oh, well, honey, Len doesn't mean any harm." Maude worried, looking from one to the other anxiously. "He just likes to argue, and he don't mean for real more than half what he says."

"That's nice to know. Even half of what he has said I find very distasteful," Ruth answered curtly.

The man grinned.

"I guess I'd better make my peace with the lady doc, Maude, before I have need for her services. I'd hate to come under her surgical knives while she is still mad at me!" he drawled.

"Now, Len, you go get washed up for supper and leave Dr. Prescott alone. I'm ashamed of you!" scolded Maude, and urged him out of the room.

When he had gone up the stairs, she turned to Ruth.

"You mustn't mind him, Doctor. He's—well, he means well. He's been sort of hipped about the welfare of the Harbour and its people ever since he came here five years ago. He's afraid you will get tired of us and go away, and he'd rather you'd do that before we get to depending on you too much, I reckon."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, gollies, I forgot to introduce him, didn't I? I guess I took it for granted he'd introduced himself. He's Leonard Hudson. He owns the veneer plant and the timber lands out back of the swamp, and he thinks the Harbour's just about the finest place in the world to live. Reckon he could live about anywhere he wanted to, come to that.

Folks say he's 'big rich,' but you'd never know it from the way he acts. He's as plain as an old shoe," Maude explained eagerly. "You'll like him, once you get to know him. Everybody does."

Ruth kept her tongue between her teeth, to keep back the sharply expressed doubt, and was relieved when the sudden clangour of a loud-voiced bell rang through the house.

"That's Cathy calling folks to supper," said Maude. "Come on, Doctor. You must be starved."

As they crossed the hall toward the dining-room, people were converging on the boarding-house from every direction, until the dining-room was well filled.

"Folks," Maude announced as she led Ruth to a long table, and indicated a chair at its head, "this is Dr. Prescott, and we must all take mighty good care of her so she'll stay with us. Reckon we can't hope to keep her as long as we kept Dr. Ed, but she's promised to stay a year."

The men seating themselves along either side of the table nodded at her, mumbled words of greeting, and then Len Hudson came in, Indian-black hair sleek and still damp from his shower, his khaki clothing fresh and neatly laundered. He took the seat at the other end of the table, flinging Ruth a polite smile, as the men along the table began talking to him.

A radiantly lovely girl of perhaps seventeen or eighteen came in through the swinging door from the kitchen, bearing aloft an enormous platter of fried chicken, golden brown and tempting.

"Doctor, this is my daughter Cathy," said

Maude proudly as the girl offered the platter to Ruth, smiling shyly.

"Hello, Cathy." Ruth smiled up at the girl as she helped herself from the platter.

"Goodness, nobody told us you were so beautiful," Cathy gasped, almost dropping the heavily laden platter.

Ruth laughed.

"Coming from you, Cathy, that's quite a compliment," she said warmly. "If Copeland Harbour turns out girls like you, I wonder Hollywood talent scouts haven't beaten a path here long ago."

"Oh, that's nice of you, Dr. Prescott," said Cathy. "But I don't imagine many of the girls here would want to leave the Harbour, even for Hollywood."

At the foot of the table Len Hudson chuckled.

"The hunting's much better here, eh, Cathy?" he teased.

Cathy tossed her lovely tawny head, and the colour crept under her skin as she offered the platter to a tall, sun-bronzed young fellow whose eyes upon her were eloquent.

"Oh, well, I've heard some of the most beautiful women in Hollywood have difficulty getting a date because there are so few eligible young men out there," admitted Ruth lightly, and looked up and down the table at the row of brawny, lean, undeniably attractive men who grinned bashfully at her.

"And since there are only five unattached gals at the Harbour, you can see why Cathy wouldn't want to go to Hollywood," Len grinned.

"I wouldn't let her if she did," said Maude crisply. "It's no place for a young and beautiful girl without friends or connections or scads of money, none of which Cathy would have in Hollywood."

"I don't want to go anyway," said Cathy cheerfully. "It's more fun here."

As she moved toward the swinging door with the now empty platter, she glanced back over her shoulder and met the eyes of the bronzed young giant, and Ruth knew that these two were in love.

As her glance returned to the table it encountered Len's, and for a moment she thought that he was going to make some teasing remark. Instead he turned away to the man beside him and addressed a low remark to him, and soon they were in conversation that excluded the rest of the table.

When the meal was over, the men thrust back their chairs, nodded at Ruth and filed out. Maude brought Ruth another cup of coffee and sat down beside her, to have her own dinner.

"If tonight's supper is a sample of the table you set, I wonder if a good deal of my practice won't be reducing pills and diets!" said Ruth lightly.

Maude chuckled and jerked a thumb over her shoulder toward the men who had by now left the house.

"Not with that gang!" she chuckled. "Those are Len's crew; they work hard and it takes a lot of good vittles to stick to their ribs. Timbering and the work at the veneer plant is rough work."

"They don't look as if it had hurt them any. A

finer-looking bunch I've seldom seen. Not all together in one group, anyway. They're like a bunch of college athletes."

"Of course," said Maude as she attacked her laden plate with unashamed appetite, "Len's gang only comes here for supper. They live in barracks at the plant and they have a cook-house where they get their breakfast and mid-day dinner. But I reckon they'd just about mutiny if they didn't get in town for supper. Not that there's much amusement, I suppose; still, they do get to circulate around and see the Harbour folks."

"Not to mention the Harbour girls," laughed Ruth. "Especially that tall blond young man with the Indian tan. I saw the way he looked at Cathy. And who could blame him? She is lovely."

Maude tossed her head and her eyes grew cold.

"That Lafe Macklin!" Her tone dismissed the man with utter contempt. "It don't do him no good casting sheep's eyes at my girl. She's too good for the likes of him and I tell her so. And him, too! He knows better than to try to hang around her, I can tell you!"

"Why, he seemed very nice," Ruth began, puzzled.

"The Macklins are trash. Good-for-nothin' squatters that live back in the swamp. Never was a one of 'em worth a gosh darn, and Lafe's no better than the rest of 'em. Even if he was, I wouldn't have my girl getting mixed up with 'em. Why, his Paw and Maw can't either one of 'em read or write. And there's a mess of young-'uns that wouldn't either if Father Bergstrom didn't

come down every so often and herd 'em off to school. Just trash, the Macklins, every last one of 'em. Just because Lafe went off to the war and was taught his letters and a few things like that don't make him any better than the rest of 'em, to my way of thinking. And Cathy knows it, too."

"I'm sorry," said Ruth quite sincerely. "He's very good-looking."

Maude sniffled eloquently.

"Oh, all the Macklins are good-looking, worthless trash though they are. His Maw looks like somebody out of a story book; and how she does it nobody knows. Except she don't do a lick of work; just hikes off with the young-'uns fishing any time they want to go; goes berry-picking instead of doing the wash. Sometimes when Father Bergstrom goes up there to round the young-'uns up and cart 'em off to school they haven't got a clean rag to their names. Folks around here don't hold with such goings-on."

Ruth was facing the swinging door into the kitchen, and now she saw it move slightly and caught a glimpse of Cathy, her face white, her eyes stormy, before the door swung shut again. And so Ruth changed the subject, asking a question about the shrimp fleet that switched Maude's thoughts from the prickly one of the Macklins and the tall, blond, bronzed giant. And the swinging door to the kitchen stayed quiet.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE first few days of getting settled into her work kept her busy and left her tired when night came. She was glad to crawl into the inviting bed in her pleasant if somewhat bleak room, and to fall asleep, her mind and her heart tightly locked against memories of David. She couldn't help it, could she, if sometimes he walked in her dreams and she awoke with her face wet with tears she had shed without being aware of them?

She looked up from her case records one morning just after the close of her morning office hours to see a man coming into the reception room. A short, plump man whose snow-white hair, still thick and inclined to curl, belied the youthful vigour of his movements and his ruddy, youthful-looking face. His blue eyes held a friendly twinkle, and even before he spoke she was smiling back at him.

"Dr. Prescott, I'm Father Bergstrom," he introduced himself, extending a hand that was no stranger to hard work. "I'm ashamed that I've been so tardy in extending my own personal welcome to you, but I've been making parish visits. Some of them take a week or ten days to complete the rounds. I'm very glad indeed, that you are here."

"Thank you, Father Bergstrom. That's very nice of you. Do sit down," Ruth invited, smiling.

"I thought if you were not busy after lunch you might like me to show you around a bit," he suggested eagerly. "I've got my jeep outside and I imagine there are places about that no one else *could* show you. After all, I've been here thirty years. There's very little about the parish I'm not familiar with. I'm nosy, you see!"

He grinned at her warmly.

"That sounds wonderful," Ruth agreed eagerly. "After all, I should learn as much as I can about where my prospective patients live and how to reach them. It's very kind of you. You haven't had lunch, have you?"

Father Bergstrom's grin was impish and boyish.

"Within thirty miles of Maude's place? It's a rare chance to get in and slip my feet beneath her table!" he chuckled.

"Then do come along. I'm sure I heard the bell," invited Ruth. "And will you be my guest?"

"Maude would shoot us both!" he assured her solemnly. "I once tried to pay for a meal here and got a dressing down that I have never forgotten!"

Ruth laughed as they walked down the hall toward the dining-room.

"She's a grand person, isn't she?" she agreed.

Maude bustled forward with sincere affection and welcome to the rotund little man in his clerical garb, and there was a chorus of greeting from the half-dozen or more people from the Harbour who came here for the mid-day meal.

Cathy came in, beaming, and Ruth saw the little man eye her with a trace of anxiety even as he greeted her with warm affection.

"I'm taking Dr. Prescott out on a sightseeing tour," he announced when the meal was over.

"Be sure to show her all the skyscrapers and the slums, Father," one of the men suggested dryly.

Father Bergstrom eyed the man steadily, and the man's gaze fell and his colour darkened.

"I'll show her the skyscrapers God built and the slums men built," he said quietly.

There was the briefest possible moment of silence, and then he turned to Ruth and said, "Well, shall we get started?"

As they left the dining-room Ruth heard Maude's voice, low-pitched so that he could not catch the words, but the tone was one of anger and sharpness.

Father Bergstrom smiled at Ruth as they crossed the wide old verandah toward the jeep that waited at the gate.

"Sometimes I find Walt Hubbard very trying," he admitted with his boyish grin. "I know patience is a Christian virtue and that a man of God is supposed to exercise a great deal of it. But a man like Walt is very hard to like."

"I don't think I know him," admitted Ruth.

"I congratulate you," said Father Bergstrom. "He owns the general store and several shacks back of it that aren't fit for pigsties. But he rents them out at what I feel is an exorbitant rate to some families who are so destitute that even such

shelter seems precious to them. Walt keeps them in practical slavery by 'furnishing them,' in the country phrase—supplying them with the necessities of life and then taking all they can make from their fishing and hunting and trapping to apply on their bills with him."

Wide-eyed, Ruth protested, "But surely something can be done——"

"Len Hudson tried to buy him out when he first came to the Harbour, but Walt wouldn't sell," said Father Bergstrom, as he climbed behind the wheel of the jeep and trod hard on the starter. "Just as he wouldn't sell to Copeland when he first came to the Harbour. After all, why should he? He's making big money and he has no conscience. It doesn't bother him in the least that he is robbing poor, illiterate souls who are in his power. I find it disturbing to realize that even in a place like the Harbour there are men like Walt."

"I'm confused," Ruth admitted. "When Mr. Copeland interviewed me about coming here, I thought it was *his* place; now Maude tells me that Mr. Hudson owns it; and now you tell me that this Walt Hubbard has property here."

Father Bergstrom nodded soberly.

"I suppose it *is* confusing," he admitted. "Mr. Copeland came here with some friends from outside on a hunting trip. The place was rather wild and lonely, yet Mr. Copeland found a beauty and a peace here that he hadn't known outside. Walt held squatter's rights to the property he occupied; so Mr. Copeland bought up a vast amount of land, for little more than a dollar an acre, since a

lot of it was swamp and a great deal under water. He had ideas for draining the swamps, developing the place; but the people who were back in the interior objected to that. It would ruin the hunting and trapping, which was the basis of their living. So Mr. Copeland reconsidered the draining; instead he set up the shrimp fishing fleet and then opened the packing plant to give employment to those as wanted to work for wages during the shrimp-fishing season, which down here is from February until mid-summer. Later on, when Len Hudson needed a place to recuperate from war wounds and various ills that were quite as much mental as physical, Mr. Copeland, a good friend of his, sent him down here. And immediately Len fell in love with the place, too. He bought timbering rights from Mr. Copeland, set up the veneer plant and settled down here. So, though Mr. Copeland still owns the shrimp fleet and the packing plant, Len owns everything else—except what Walt Hubbard won't sell. Is it all clear now?"

Ruth met the twinkling eyes and laughed.

"Well, it's not quite so confused," she admitted. "Why did Mr. Copeland go away?"

"Did you meet Mrs. Copeland?" asked Father Bergstrom.

"Why, no, I didn't!"

Father Bergstrom nodded.

"Then I can understand why you'd ask such a question. The good lady came here just once, looked at the place in utter horror, and ske-daddled! After all, I don't suppose anybody could

blame her, really. With a son and a daughter to be brought up, and being a city lady born and bred, there's not much here at the Harbour to attract her."

Ruth nodded. "He seems to be very fond of the place, though."

"Oh, he is. He spends his vacation here each year—that is, he did until a couple of years ago when Mrs. Copeland felt the children should have the advantage of a trip abroad and insisted he go with them. Last year I believe it was Central and South America."

"I see." Ruth nodded. "Incidentally, does anybody live on this road? It's not one that I've travelled before."

"Well, not on this road, but back in the swamp," said Father Bergstrom. "The Macklins."

Startled, Ruth looked swiftly at him, and he smiled faintly.

"I can see you've had Maude's run-down on the family," he said dryly. "Naturally, since her Cathy is head over heels in love with Lafe Macklin, and since Maude would loathe any man who had the audacity to fall in love with her one chick, she vents her spleen on Lafe and his family. That is one of the reasons I wanted you to meet them. The family, I mean, so that you can see for yourself what they are really like."

Ruth studied him curiously.

"Obviously you like them," she said.

"Very much," admitted Father Bergstrom. "Oh, I admit that they are a rather feckless crew. But I am convinced that Jared Macklin doesn't com-

mit illegal acts in his hunting and trapping. There are rumours that he traps ospreys, and other birds who are protected by law, to sell their feathers. But since it is illegal for women to wear the feathers of such protected birds, and the feathers can only be sold abroad, I can assure you that Jared hasn't the facilities or even the education to market such things."

He drove in silence for a few minutes, and then, his bushy brows drawn together in a frown of concentration, he went on.

"No one quite knows where the Macklins came from; they aren't sure themselves how they came to be here. But there is an old legend that many years ago an English ship was wrecked somewhere along the coast; and that the survivors were never rescued. They just moved back into the bush, and managed somehow to subsist. And the Macklins and a few other squatter-families are descendants of that shipwreck's survivors. It's a fascinating subject to me; but one that I've not been able to learn much about. Apparently, if the story of the shipwreck is true, all records and papers were lost in the wreck. Whatever the various families know has come down to them by word of mouth from those ancestors; and with each generation more of the true story has been lost and more legend has grown, until now it's all but impossible to separate the truth from the fiction. One very odd thing that inclines me to believe that the shipwreck story is true is that now and then you find one of the squatters using an Elizabethan expression that sounds pure Shake-

speare. They're a self-contained lot; have no dealings with outsiders except for the twice-a-year trip to the Harbour to dispose of skins and hides and to stock up on such simple supplies as they are unable to grow themselves."

"And these are the Macklins?" asked Ruth.

"The Macklins and the Jeremys and the Blake-lies," nodded Father Bergstrom.

Ahead of them there was a narrow stream and a rickety, weather-worn pier; a rough, shaky-looking affair that made Ruth's eyes widen as she saw the small boat bobbing on the water and saw the business-like way Father Bergstrom brought the jeep to a halt at the very edge of the stream.

As she stepped from the jeep, she glanced across the dark, narrow stream and once more caught her breath at an unexpected sight. For the other side of the narrow stream was a blanket of pale lavender beauty; vast masses of delicate-coloured, fragile-looking blossoms that stretched as far as the eye could reach.

"What——?" she began breathlessly.

Father Bergstrom chuckled dryly, without mirth.

"Beautiful, isn't it? And deadly!"

Ruth stared at him.

"Deadly?" she repeated incredulously.

He nodded.

"Water hyacinths. You've heard about them? Read about them?"

"I'm afraid not."

"They are deadly because they multiply so rapidly and spread in every direction. They're a

menace to any sort of water navigation. I suppose you think this is a narrow stream?"

"Well, of course." Ruth looked down at the dark water that scarcely seemed wide enough to accept the small motor boat.

"It stretches as far as the hyacinths do," Father Bergstrom told her grimly. "It's just that the water hyacinths are covering its surface as fast as they can! And that's so fast that the government is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to destroy them. But the only thing that can kill them is a hard freeze that lasts for several days—and of course, there has never been a freeze in this part of the country. So the hyacinths go on spreading and spreading; no man back in this part of the country so much as tries to keep a cow: the cows never seem to learn that the hyacinths aren't good to eat, or don't cover solid ground, so they move out grazing—and either drown or get bogged in the mud and starve to death."

Ruth stared, wide-eyed, at the delicately lovely blanket of blossoms that covered the dark water, and drew a long breath.

"It doesn't seem possible anything so beautiful could be evil," she admitted.

Father Bergstrom chuckled as he helped her into the motor-boat.

"I hope you're chalking up a good mark for me," he said as he followed her into the boat.

Ruth looked at the small smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth and the twinkle in his eyes.

“For not pointing out that one of the greatest dangers about evil is that it is so often beautiful on the surface,” he commented dryly, and Ruth laughed. “Of course it is, but I prefer to avoid the obvious!”

CHAPTER SIX

THE boat was small, but its motor chugged sturdily as they travelled down the stream, and Ruth was fascinated by the scenery they were traversing, so that she had no idea how long they had been travelling before, ahead of them, she saw a small, crude, makeshift dock thrusting out into the water and beyond it in a small clearing a rough two-roomed cabin, where children suddenly swarmed at sound of the boat.

Father Bergstrom angled the motor-boat expertly to the dock, and a half-grown boy, bare-foot and wearing only a ragged pair of blue jeans, ran down to catch the anchoring rope that was thrown up to him.

"Hi, Father! Gee, swell to see you!" the boy called down as he made the boat fast.

"Even if you know what I came for?" asked Father Bergstrom.

The boy grinned, unabashed.

"Well, sure. But I don't mind going to school. Well, not much! And it ain't long until school's out, anyways."

Father Bergstrom accepted the boy's help in clambering out on the dock, and they both reached down to help Ruth. When she stood beside them on the dock, Father Bergstrom turned and waved at the group in front of the house.

"Jimmy, this is Dr. Prescott, the new doctor at the Harbour," Father Bergstrom introduced Ruth. "This is Jimmy Macklin, Dr. Prescott."

Jimmy's eyes, ruddy-brown beneath a tangled thatch of red hair, widened.

"Well, gee—a lady doc!" he gasped.

"Hello, Jimmy. You'll get used to me." Ruth smiled at him.

The boy's freckled face reddened.

'Well, sure. It's only—I surmise maybe all of us was so used to Dr. Ed——' He turned and led the way along the dock to where the others waited.

A tall, lanky man with thinning hair that was greying but still held more than a tinge of red, and dressed as Jimmy was in nothing but ragged blue jeans, stepped forward with an old-fashioned gesture of hospitality.

"Proud to see you, Reverend," he said heartily, and extended a big, gnarled hand.

"It's good to see you Jared," said Father Bergstrom. "Dr. Prescott, this is Jared Macklin. Our new doctor at the Harbour, Jared."

Jared managed to conceal his startled surprise not much better than his son had done.

"A lady doc?" he gasped.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Macklin! I satisfied Mr. Copeland as to my capabilities——" Ruth began stiffly.

"Oh, shucks, Dr. Prescott. It ain't nothing like that!" protested Jared anxiously. "It's just that I was surprised. Reckon the wimmen-folk will be mighty glad to have a lady doc. You may have a

little trouble with the men-folk, but you mustn't mind them. They just ain't used to lady docs."

"I'm beginning to discover that," Ruth admitted ruefully.

"Any of these swamp critters give you any trouble, Doc, you just get word to me, and me and my boys will take care of them right smart," Jared promised.

"Thanks. I'll remember that, Mr. Macklin, and thank you." Ruth smiled at him.

"Shucks, Doc, don't call me Mr. Macklin. Always makes me feel like I owe somebody money. Folks all call me Jared, and that's the way I like it."

"Thanks, Jared, I'll be glad to."

Father Bergstrom looked over the group of big-eyed children, of whom Jimmy seemed the oldest, and then he turned to Jared.

"Where's Eunice?" he asked.

"Oh, she took the two oldest girls and went fishing," Jared grinned. "They ought to be back right soon."

From back of the house there came a woman who made Ruth's eyes widen. She was a magnificent animal: lithe, tall, wearing her old overalls and faded, ragged cotton shirt as gracefully as some fine lady in mink. Her hair was a flame of copper-coloured beauty.

"Hi, Reverend," she greeted Father Bergstrom, and there was laughter in her brown eyes, flecked with gold, as she eyed Ruth with a frank and childlike curiosity. "If I'd knowed you was bringing company, Reverend, I'd have cleaned up a

bit. But you can't fish and stay dressed up in silks and satins, I always say."

While Father Bergstrom introduced Eunice, Ruth saw Jared's eyes clinging lovingly to his wife, and a small, amused quirk at the corner of his mouth. It was a look of deep, abiding love that bordered on worship, and made Ruth feel a startled wonder. These two were far from young; Eunice was the mother of Lafe, a very much grown up young man, and of all these children. She must be almost fifty. But there was such a warmth of deep devotion between her and her husband that Ruth felt almost guilty at having witnessed that swift, winged look that had passed between them when Eunice had first appeared.

This then, Ruth reflected privately, was the woman whom Maude Elliott had dismissed with such contempt!

"Well, now I'm proud to hear we're going to have us a lady doc," Eunice told Ruth heartily, shaking hands firmly, her hands hard and work-calloused. "I sure hope you'll stay with us as long as Dr. Ed did, ma'am. Reckon none of us can be sure we won't be needing you one of these days."

"I can't imagine you ever needing a doctor, Mrs. Macklin. I've never seen such a picture of radiant health," Ruth told her quite sincerely.

"It's the swamp living that does it, Doc," Eunice grinned. "Reckon you live to Maude Elliott's place in town and reckon you must know my Lafe?"

"I've met him at dinner——" Ruth began.

"Dinner? You mean that boy's so crazy about Cathy he don't eat dinner at the camp and drives all the way in town in the middle of the day?" Eunice protested, alarmed and indignant.

"No, no, I mean supper, of course," Ruth corrected herself, and made a mental note that she must learn to call the evening meal "supper" instead of "dinner." He's very attractive, but he's a bit shy, and I haven't had a chance to get very well acquainted with him."

"Shy!" Eunice snapped. "He ain't shy. He's just so blamed scared of that Maudie Elliott he ain't right sure whether he's coming or going. And it purely makes me ashamed of him. He ain't got no call to be scared of her. I didn't raise him to be scared of no woman that ever drawed breath."

"Thing for Lafe to do is find hisself a nice, pretty swamp gal and get married and fix him a place out here like we done. But no, he's got to have Cathy or nobody!" Jared was irate.

"Reckon then it'll have to be nobody, Pop," Eunice reminded him lightly. "Reckon the lady doc ain't interested in our personal and private problems nohow."

She turned to Father Bergstrom, and though her manner was perfectly friendly, there was a hint of reserve that told Ruth she was skirting around the real subject that she knew Father Bergstrom had come to discuss.

"Stay for supper, Reverend, you and the lady doc," she invited hospitably. "Me and the kids

done right well with our fishing, and there's plenty o' corn and tomatoes in the garden, and I cooked a nice mess of string-beans before I went fishing."

"And nobody in the world cooks better than you do, Eunice," Father Bergstrom said warmly. "But I'm taking Dr. Prescott on a sight-seeing tour, so if she gets a call from out here in the swamps, she'll know how to reach her patient. We'll take a rain-check on that invitation, if we may."

"Sure, Reverend, sure. Any time at all," Eunice assured him cheerfully, and Ruth sensed that she was braced for the real purpose of Father Bergstrom's visit.

"I'll be by to pick up the children for school Monday morning, Eunice. Be sure you have them ready bright and early," said Father Bergstrom quietly but firmly.

"They ain't going to school no more, Reverend."

Eunice's voice was as quiet as his had been and even more firm, and her eyes met his with no hint of wavering or giving way.

"Now, listen to me, Eunice——" Father Bergstrom began.

"No, you listen to me." Unexpectedly Eunice was angry, her eyes bright and hot, her colour showing behind the bronze. "The kids know their letters and they can cipher real good. We got everything in the world we need right here for them to be happy and contented. Lafe was satisfied here, fishing and hunting and trapping, and his friends was swamp people that liked him just

the way he was. Then the Draft Board hunted him up and drug him off to fight a war he didn't know nothing about. Now he ain't satisfied nowhere, seems like. You take the kids out of here and stuff their heads full of book-learning, and all you'll do will be just to make them dissatisfied with their lot in life."

"But, Eunice, my dear, some day they'll have to go out into the world——" Father Bergstrom began gently.

"How come they will? They's room in the swamp for folks like us. I reckon they always will be. Us squatters is the onliest people that know how to live here. Nobody else would want it. It's our way of life, and it was our fathers' and mothers' before us, and I reckon it's going to be for our kids. And you ain't going to change it, no matter how much you try to sweet-talk us."

And as though she could trust herself no longer she turned and stalked into the house and the battered old door slammed behind her.

Father Bergstrom sighed and Jared looked embarrassed.

"Mighty sorry Eunice got her mad up, Reverend. But you know how set she is ag'in' the young 'uns getting eddicated," he apologized awkwardly.

"But surely, Jared, *you* can see how much the children need schooling," pleaded Father Bergstrom, but without much hope.

Jared's lean jaw hardened.

"Reckon I don't, Reverend," he answered grimly. "Reckon I feel right much the same way

Eunice does. Things Lafe told us when he come back from that Koree-place—if that's what you eddicate a boy for, then I reckon I think the swamp's the best place for us squatters and our young 'uns."

Father Bergstrom sighed and turned away.

"There is a law that requires that children be sent to school, you know, Jared," he spoke over his shoulder.

Jared grinned, revealing strong yellow teeth in his gaunt, bearded face.

"Come to that, Reverend, you know them law fellers don't even come in here to hunt up likker stills. 'Course, I ain't saying they is any moon-shining going on; still and all, if the law fellers won't come after them, I reckon they ain't likely to come after young 'uns that's better off minding their own business at home," Jared went on.

Father Bergstrom threw up his hands with a gesture of defeat.

"All right, all right Jared. They're your children and Eunice's. If this is the way you want them to grow up, I suppose I have neither the legal or moral authority to try to force you to let them learn out of books."

He turned and walked down to the rickety old pier where the boat was tied up, and Ruth walked behind him, sympathizing with his feeling of defeat yet feeling an almost reluctant agreement with many of Jared's and Eunice's arguments.

"Hope they's no hard feeling, Reverend?" said Jared anxiously.

"Of course not, Jared." Father Bergstrom shook hands with him, and they helped Ruth down into the boat.

"Y'all come again, Reverend. And you, too, Doc. Always be mighty glad to see you and have you stay for supper," invited Jared hospitably.

Ruth smiled and thanked him. The motor sputtered, caught, and the boat swung away from the pier and back into the slow-moving black water.

"Well, what did you think of the Macklins, Dr. Prescott?" Father Bergstrom asked at last.

"Fascinating," said Ruth swiftly, "I had no idea there were people left like that so near what some of us fondly call 'civilization'."

Father Bergstrom sighed heavily.

"What makes it so hard for me to argue with them is that, in part at least, I agree with them," he admitted frankly.

Startled, Ruth cried, "You mean you think it is all right for them to deny their children an education?"

Father Bergstrom grinned ruefully.

"My first parish was in a slum section of a very large city," he told her. "I saw a great many very ugly things."

Ruth nodded soberly.

"I interned in a big charity hospital in Atlanta," she agreed. "I can remember a great many emergency calls to slum areas; I can remember, too, calls that were not from slum areas but that were just as ugly."

Father Bergstrom nodded in agreement, and they were both busy with their own thoughts as the boat sped as fast as the tangle of lovely but dangerous water hyacinths would permit, back to the spot where the jeep had been parked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Ruth went up the walk to the boarding-house after saying good-bye to Father Bergstrom, Len Hudson came out of the house and held the door open for her with a friendly, tentative smile.

"Hello. Been seeing the sights with Father Bergstrom? He's quite a character, isn't he?" he commented pleasantly.

"He's a wonderful man. I enjoyed it very much," Ruth told him.

"I'm hoping you are free for Saturday night. The boys at the camp would like to throw a party for you," he said lightly. "So you could meet a lot of the folks who live around these parts, and get acquainted. It's their way of welcoming a new-comer to the Harbour."

Ruth surveyed him coolly.

"I wonder you think it would be worth while to introduce me when you feel so sure I'm going to be here such a short while," she reminded him.

Len smiled at her.

"Oh, the mail boat has come and gone twice since you arrived and you're still here, so I feel we may settle down and hopefully expect you to be with us for quite awhile." His tone made it a tacit apology.

"Your confidence in me is quite touching." There was a tinge of ice in her voice as she walked past him and into her office.

Len followed her and perched on the corner of the old wicker table that stood in the centre of the room, laden with magazines that Ruth had ordered on the mail boat's latest trip.

"Look," he said, and now his tone was frankly conciliatory. "I admit we got off on the wrong foot when we first met. I'm sorry; it was my fault, of course. But I was knocked for a loop to discover Copeland had sent us a lady doc. If I was offensive, I humbly apologize; if, since then, I've done anything to ruffle your very pretty feathers, I apologize for that, too. In fact, for anything I may have done or said that could stand in the way of our being friends—I offer a complete, humble blanket apology!"

Ruth turned from her desk and met his eyes straightly. They were friendly, coaxing, and suddenly she gave him her full smile and laid her hand in his that he extended.

Len stood up, his hand closing warmly over hers.

"Friends?" he asked as though for the assurance of the words.

"Why not?" she laughed. "The Harbour is too small a place for people to be anything but friendly, isn't it?"

Len chuckled wryly.

"That's a lovely thought," he agreed. "Don't let me say anything to destroy it."

"Goodness, that sounds ominous!" Ruth laughed. "Don't tell me the Harbour has a feud going on."

"I'll wait and let you find out about it for yourself," he chuckled, "since it isn't anything

that can be a danger to you yourself. Of course, in another month when the shrimp fleet goes out and the packing plant opens up, the Harbour will double in population. Drifters, people that follow the fleet, men that operate the fleet—it's a sort of melting pot, thimble-sized. You'll be pretty busy week-ends patching up black eyes and bashed skulls and split lips."

"You make it sound fascinating!" she commented dryly.

"Well, let's say it doesn't exactly get monotonous!" he confessed with a humorous twinkle in his eyes. "I'd be the last to deny that my boys sometimes get into the act. Some of the girls who work in the packing plant are very good-looking, and you've already discovered there's a scarcity of pretty unattached girls around."

"Thanks for the warning," Ruth laughed. "Perhaps I'd better order some more first-aid supplies when the mail boat comes this week."

"That's an idea," Len agreed. "But if you happen to run short, between the mail boat's visits, give me a ring out at the camp. We have a fairly well-organized clinic out there with a sizeable supply of first-aid stuff. You must come out and see it sometime, and tell me what we lack."

"Oh," asked Ruth, startled. "do you have a camp doctor?"

"Just the company clerk who was in the Army Medical Corps for four years. He thought when he first got out of the Army, he might take his GI training and become a doctor, but he got married instead."

There was a faint edge to his voice, and Ruth raised her eyebrows.

"That sounds a bit as though you didn't approve of marriage," she suggested.

Startled, he made a swift gesture of protest.

"Oh, but I do, I do!" he assured her hastily. "I think marriage is a very fine state, for the other fellow! It's just not my dish of tea."

Ruth laughed aloud.

"Famous last words!" Her voice was lightly teasing. "Mind yourself, my friend; I've always found that when a man makes that statement out of his firm conviction that he's not the marryin' kind, it's only a few steps to the altar, with a starry-eyed girl keeping a close grip on his arm!"

Len studied her intently.

"From that, I get the impression you aren't exactly sold on marriage, either—for yourself, I mean," he said quietly, and saw burning colour sweep over her face and a hint of frost in her eyes so that he apologized swiftly. "Sorry! I didn't intend to offend——"

"Don't be silly! You were not offensive. After all, I started the whole thing, so let's drop it, shall we? And I'd better get cleaned up for supper. See you later," said Ruth, and went swiftly up the stairs, her head held high.

As Ruth made ready for supper, she smiled slowly at the memory of Len's apology; of his request that they be friends. He was nice when he made the effort, she had to admit. But her smile faded as she thought of David and then

wrenched her thoughts away with an effort that was so painful she mentally winced.

When she went down after the supper bell rang she found the men waiting for her, standing uneasily behind their chairs, waiting until she was seated before they slid into their own chairs.

"You shouldn't have waited for me," she protested. "I may often be late, and I'd be very upset to think that you were all waiting supper for me."

"Won't hurt 'em none to wait for you when they know you're in the house, Ruth," said Maude cheerfully as she and Cathy began serving the more than ample supper.

"Mr. Macklin," Ruth addressed Lafe who, startled, looked up at her as though not sure she had really spoken his name. "I met your family this afternoon."

Lafe, scarlet now, swung a startled look at Cathy and an uneasy one at Maude. Both of whom had stopped serving and were watching her, wide-eyed.

"I think your mother is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," said Ruth pleasantly.

Lafe's brick-red now was caused by pride, not embarrassment.

"Hi, isn't she something?" he beamed proudly. "Were they all right?"

"I've never seen so much health and good spirits in one family in my life," Ruth laughed. "If all the people around here are as healthy as your family, Mr. Macklin, I'll be out of a job."

"Well, I guess they *are* pretty healthy," Lafe admitted.

"Your brother, Jimmy, killed an alligator and is tanning the hide to bring in when your father brings in the skins and furs they have trapped," Ruth told him, smiling warmly at him. "Jimmy seems to be quite a lad."

"A sin and a shame he has no education and can barely read and write," sniffed Maude, and stalked out with an empty platter.

Lafe looked down at his plate, and as Cathy offered Ruth a huge bowl of green beans, cooked with tiny new potatoes and a generous slab of streak o' lean bacon, Ruth looked up to see the shine of tears in the girl's lovely eyes.

By the time supper was over and the men were leaving the table, Cathy and Maude came in for their own supper, since there was no longer any serving to be done.

Ruth accepted another cup of coffee, because she knew Maude wanted her to stay and chat while she and Cathy ate.

"Seems like the only time I have to visit with you, Ruth, is after supper," Maude smiled. "Feeding a swarm of hungry men, that empties a platter fast as you can put it before them, sure keeps a body hopping. They're good boys, though, and I plumb like to see men enjoy their vittles."

"Which they certainly do, and why not? You're a marvellous cook, Maude. That shrimp pilau was superb," Ruth assured her.

"Hope you don't get too tired of shrimp. We get so many of them when the fleet's operating.

I've got a freezer just about loaded down with last season's catch, and I've got to make room for the new catch!" Maude offered a tacit apology, and before Ruth could answer she went on swiftly, "So you and Father Bergstrom went to see the Macklins. I bound you never saw folks living like that before, Ruth."

She slanted a glance toward Cathy, whose face was burning with colour.

"They seem to be very comfortable, very well fed and healthy and completely contented," Ruth said gently.

"Contented? That's what I can't forgive 'em for. Nobody with a mess of kids has any business being contented living like that."

"Lafe seems a very nice young man with a good job and ambition to better himself," Ruth said impulsively. "After all, he and Cathy would not live with his family——"

Maude turned on her so fiercely that Ruth was startled.

"Now don't you go siding with Cathy and Lafe," Maude snapped. "I have trouble enough with Cathy without you sticking your two cents worth in."

Ruth thrust back her chair and stood up, a bright flag of colour high on her cheek-bones, her eyes cold.

"I assure you I haven't the faintest intention of siding with anybody on any subject whatever," she said icily. "I'm perfectly aware of my position here and you may be quite sure I shall not attempt to go beyond it."

Maude looked slightly ashamed, but she offered no word as Ruth walked out of the dining-room and across to her office.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEN, who had been lounging in the living-room, twisting the dials of the radio which emitted an almost unending squawking of "rock 'n' roll," turned off the instrument and followed Ruth into her office.

"Hi," he said tentatively, and Ruth turned on him sharply.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Len's eyebrows went up and he took a backward step.

"Put down that gun, Lady doc. I'm a friend, not an enemy," he protested in mock terror.

"Sorry. I'm not in a very playful mood."

"No, stupid as I am, I saw that at a first glance," Len admitted, and then quietly, "Trouble with Maude I have no doubt; and I also have no doubt it was about the Macklins and Cathy."

"I prefer not to discuss it," said Ruth stiffly.

Len grinned wryly.

"That's an attitude that will get you nowhere in the Harbour, Lady doc!" he assured her. "That's practically the only entertainment available in these parts; discussing anything and everything from the very first word to the last. Subjects are torn apart, put back together and torn apart again, until something else happens and offers fresh food for discussion."

"You make it sound very intriguing," she mocked unpleasantly.

Len perched on the corner of the wicker table and studied her.

"Well, I never claimed anything about the Harbour was intriguing, remember? It's a slow, dull, tiresome, monotonous little place with a few people who are too inbred to be interested in anything beyond the ends of their collective noses. The monotony, the lack of any entertainment or recreation, you may remember, was the main reason I was so sure you wouldn't be able to stick it."

Ruth drew a long, hard breath and her hands clenched tightly.

"In the short while I've been here," she reminded him tensely, "I have become convinced that I am needed. What more could a doctor ask?"

"If a doctor is a woman, and young and beautiful, I'm afraid she has a perfect right to ask a great deal more," said Len quietly. "Such as some place to go and relax after a hard day's grind; some place to wear pretty clothes and exchange conversation with people whose minds are not as set on the earthly fundamentals as the people here at the Harbour."

Ruth faced him, her head high.

"I thought you and I had settled our feud and were going to be friends," she taunted him.

Len stood up and gave her a bow, and smiled.

"And so we are, Lady doc, and so we are," he assured her firmly. "It's a very elegant night outside, with a moon made to order for a long country

drive. My car is waiting; could I interest you in seeing some of the country by moonlight? It's quite a sight, I assure you."

"Thanks." Ruth's tone was vibrant with relief. "I'd like that. And since I don't keep night office hours——"

Len laughed as he held the door open for her.

"You'll understand why even a grave emergency rarely calls a doctor out in these parts, as soon as we've left the big city behind," he assured her, guiding her out of the house and down the walk. "There are only two telephones; one is at the camp, the other here. If a patient requires medical attention at night, somebody must come in person to hunt the doctor and guide her to the patient. Nobody's coming out on a trip like that unless the patient is gravely ill or badly hurt. When the shrimp fleet goes into operation, of course, it will be different, since most of the packing-house personnel and some of the crews of the fleet live right inside town!"

"But where——" Ruth looked about her.

"Oh, some in tents, some in Walt Hubbard's shacks." Len dismissed the thought as he held open the gate for her and they walked a few paces to where his convertible was parked.

A giant live-oak, festooned with the inevitable Spanish moss, stood just beyond where the car was parked. The whole scene was illuminated by the radiance of a great copper-coloured moon, but beneath the live-oak there was a dense black shadow. And from the shadow there came the sound of wild, uncontrollable weeping.

Startled, unconscious that she was eavesdropping, Ruth stood still and heard a girl's voice, broken with sobbing, stammering, "Oh, but she'll never let us, Lafe. You ought to forget me and go away and find someone else."

"Hush that foolish talk, baby," Ruth heard Lafe's voice, aching with tenderness. "You'll be twenty-one one of these days, and then she can't stop us."

"Oh, but, Lafe, that's years and years and years." Cathy's voice was a small broken wail.

Ruth slid swiftly into the car and Len drove away, leaving the two young lovers to their darkness.

"Poor young devils," said Len softly after a moment.

"That's why Maude and I quarrelled. Oh, I couldn't dignify our very brief exchange as a quarrel," said Ruth grimly. "I merely pointed out that Lafe seemed a very respectable young man and Cathy would be marrying him, not his family; and Maude rounded on me and demanded that I keep still and not take sides."

"Sounds like Maude," agreed Len. "She speaks her mind, as they say hereabouts."

"Of course, Cathy is very young—seventeen!" admitted Ruth.

Len chuckled dryly.

"Girls marry at fourteen in these parts, and even younger," Len reminded her.

"But at that age, how can they possibly know whether they are really in love? That they won't meet someone else when they are older that they will *really* love?" Ruth protested.

"That's easy to answer," Len said in his dry tone that agreed with her thought even while he was pointing out that down here it wouldn't work. "Once a girl is married, no matter how young she is, that's it down here. She doesn't get a chance to meet someone else; no man in his right mind would risk getting himself murdered for casting sheep's eyes at another man's wife. That's one crime that very rarely ever crops up down here! And as for divorce—well, you've met Father Bergstrom. Would you like to face him and tell him that you're sorry, but the marriage he performed for you is a little too much for you to take and you'd like to have it dissolved?"

Ruth laughed in spite of herself.

"Frankly, no! He's a very grand person, but I'd hate to see him when he's really angry!" she admitted.

"Slow to anger, but terrible in his wrath, I think expresses the good Father very well," grinned Len. "He disapproves of me, you know. Or did you find that out today?"

Startled, Ruth answered, "Why, no! I don't think your name was even mentioned."

"I'm crushed!" Len chuckled. "That should really put me in my proper place, don't you think? That Father Bergstrom didn't think me even worthy of mention, not even to warn you against me."

"Should he have?" asked Ruth gently.

Len slanted a glance at her and nodded.

"He disapproves of me strongly because I don't lay down the law with my men and insist that

they attend church regularly on Sundays," he told her.

"Oh, but that's silly. Why, you couldn't do that! They'd revolt!"

"Sometime when you're better acquainted with Father Bergstrom maybe you'll point that out to him. I have, but he only insists that it's an excuse I'm offering. I'm afraid to go to church myself for fear of being denounced from the pulpit for not bringing my entire crew with me."

Ruth laughed.

"Now that sounds like a feeble excuse if I ever heard one! And I've heard one and that's it," she assured him firmly.

They were driving fast along the wide winding white road, shaded on either side by enormous trees from whose giant limbs the masses of Spanish moss stirred in a breeze that one could scarcely feel. There was an eerie, ghostly beauty about the scene, and it seemed to lay a finger on their lips, demanding silence.

Suddenly around a curve there was an opening into a lane. Only if one were looking for it could it have been seen, yet Len turned his car through the overgrown opening and proceeded slowly, until ahead of them, there was a scene so lovely that Ruth caught her breath.

Len stopped the car and switched off the headlights, and watched her as she took in the scene with a startled wonder.

The house, a huge white two-storied house with massive columns across the front, seemed to float in the silver bowl of moonlight like some incredible

ship on a silver sea. On either side there were the great dark trees. In front there was the gentle sweep of a lawn, and from somewhere there came on the faint breath of air the tangy fragrance of flowers she could not identify. In its stately beauty, the house was like something out of a dream.

"It's incredible," Ruth breathed. "I can't believe it. A house like that within a few miles of the Harbour! It's like something out of a story-book."

Len nodded soberly.

"The moonlight is very kind to it," he agreed. "That's why I wanted you to see it first in the moonlight. By day, it's a sad old house; dilapidated, neglected, falling to ruin. But by moonlight it's another house entirely. I think the ghosts of the people who lived there and loved it in its days of glory must come back on a night like this to recapture the magic they once knew here."

"What a shame a lovely place like that is allowed to fall in ruins," Ruth protested, "with no one living in it."

"Oh, but someone lives in it," Len assured her dryly. "Or rather not *in* it, but in one of the slave cabins at the back. The last living descendant of the people who built it. She's very old now and very disturbed in her mind at times, though at other times, her mind is very clear and very sharp. I've been trying to buy the place from her and to restore it ever since I first saw it. But she just cackles at me and says she was born here and she aims to die here, and after she dies, she doesn't

care what happens to it, though she hopes lightning will strike it and it will burn to the ground."

"Why, she must be a horrible old creature!" gasped Ruth.

"Miss Lily? Well, no, I wouldn't call her that," Len argued. "It's just that she has lived alone for so many years, and has had so much heartbreak and grief, that she's got—well, a little warped in her mind, I suppose. I'll bring you to call on her one day soon. But I must warn you in advance that she can be a rather terrifying old creature if we happen to catch her in one of her mentally disturbed moods."

Ruth looked about her at the eerie, desolate loneliness and shivered.

"If she lives here quite alone, I don't wonder that she's mentally disturbed. I should think it would be dangerous for her!"

"She's been alone for many years. Her family was once very wealthy and very prominent. But her brother, Rumson, was arrested and charged with murder. Her father died of a stroke a short time after. Everybody but the doctors called it a broken heart. They say Miss Lily had a fiancé who broke the engagement. She's been shut up here ever since."

Ruth was pondering the ugly story as they drove back toward the Harbour.

"But how does she get supplies, food and all the rest of it?" she puzzled.

"Oh, she has a vegetable garden she tends herself, and she has chickens and eggs and she comes to the Harbour once a week, bringing her eggs

which she trades for such things as coffee and sugar and flour. It's a sight to see, I can tell you."

"She does sound like a character," admitted Ruth.

"She has some cats, and when she gets more kittens than she feels the milk from her cow will feed, she brings them in in a basket and leaves one or two in place of the flower or plant she has taken. It drives the Harbour women mad, since about the only thing nobody in the Harbour needs more of is cats!" Len grinned.

"I'd discovered that! They are all over the place, all very fat and sleek, and so well fed I don't believe they'd chase a mouse if it came up and spat in their eye!" Ruth laughed.

"There's a story about that one very hot day last summer. Big Red—you'll meet him when the shrimp fleet starts operating; he's five years old, weighs twelve pounds and despises everybody in the world and has claws to back up his dislike—anyway, the rumour is that Big Red was asleep in a cool spot under one of the pilings at the end of the dock just below the packing plant, when a frightened field mouse ran past him. They say Big Red opened one eye, cocked it at the mouse, yawned and went back to sleep. I, for one, believe the story! You will, too, when you see him."

"He sounds like quite a character, too!" Ruth laughed. "Who owns him?"

Len pretended deep shock.

"Never let anybody hear you use that word about Big Red!" he protested. "Nobody owns Big Red. He's a free soul, and independent of all

human relationships! Never try to pet him or touch him. If you meet him on the road, give way! He's a vicious brute."

"Oh, come now." Ruth derided. "After all, he's only a cat."

"I know Big Red. And I don't want you all clawed and bitten by a critter like that!"

He looked down at her as they approached the sleeping village.

"I suppose you won't be too shocked if I say I like you too much to want you to get tangled up with Big Red," he suggested.

"Flattery, my dear Mr. Hudson, will get you nowhere," she said sedately, a twinkle in her eyes.

"Flattery? Since when was the sober truth considered flattery? And my name is Len, not Mr. Hudson."

He brought the car to a halt in front of the Elliott house, and Ruth said quite sincerely, "Thank you for a lovely evening. I've enjoyed it very much."

"Not half as much as I have," Len assured her. "We must do this again—and again—and again!"

Ruth laughed as she stepped out of the car and said good night.

CHAPTER NINE

RUTH was sitting before the old-fashioned dressing-table in nightgown, robe and slippers, brushing her hair, when there came a very gentle knock at the door of her room.

Startled, she turned swiftly and called, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Dr. Prescott—Maude. Can I come in a minute?"

"Of course," answered Ruth, and opened the door.

Maude, in an ancient robe, her hair done up on steel-curlers, came in and looked, abashed, at Ruth.

"I'm purely ashamed of the way I snapped at you downstairs, Dr. Prescott. I came to apologize. I couldn't sleep until I did."

Ruth smiled.

"That's quite all right. I understood perfectly. Sit down, won't you?"

A look of vast relief spread over Maude's plump, highly coloured face, and she dropped into a chair and drew a deep breath, beaming happily at Ruth.

"I do declare, I don't know what made me flare up like that," she admitted as Ruth lit a cigarette and sat down opposite her. "I suppose I just about go out of my mind at the thought of my Cathy all tangled up with those awful Macklins. They are

trash—and Cathy's been raised to better things than Lafe could ever offer her."

Ruth hesitated and then, remembering the heart-broken voice from beneath the shadow of the giant oak earlier in the evening, she said gently, "I suppose all mothers feel that way about their daughters. Especially widows, with an only daughter, who have built all their dreams and hopes about their girls. But Lafe himself seems a fine young man."

"He's a Macklin!" sniffed Maude, obviously the most damning indictment she could deliver against him. "I'm going to send Cathy away from the Harbour, that's what."

Ruth stared at her, startled.

"Send her away? But where?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," said Maude eagerly. "When I'd apologized, I mean. I thought maybe you'd know some place I could send her."

"Have you talked to Cathy about it?"

"No," said Maude harshly. "And I'm not aiming to until I get everything all fixed up. Then I'll tell her just before the mail boat leaves, and she'll be on it! She can fight and yell all she wants to then, but it won't do her any good."

"That sounds pretty high-handed, Maude."

"I'm her mother! She's got a right to mind me when I tell her to do something."

"But she's not a child any longer, Maude."

"I don't call seventeen being plumb grown up."

"How old were you, Maude, when you married?"

Maude's face crumpled, and there was bitterness in her eyes.

"Fifteen—and that's why I'm not going to let Cathy make the same mistake I did!" she said harshly. "I won't see her set out on the same road I did, and break her heart a dozen times a week—no, sir! I won't let her do it!" Maude was on her feet now. "She's going off somewhere to study and make something out of herself; as far away from Lafe Macklin as I can get her."

She stalked to the door and turned, her eyes those of an enemy.

"And if you won't help me, I'll get a letter off to Mr. Copeland in Atlanta. He'll know a good boarding-house where she'll be safe and looked after, and he'll know a place she can study to be a stenographer or a book-keeper or something that will earn her a good living. And she'll have a chance to see what the world away from the Harbour looks like; and she'll meet men that will make her forget Lafe Macklin was ever born."

"I'm sorry, Maude."

"Oh, I reckon you couldn't do much, feeling like you do that the Macklins is fine people. Trash and dirt is what I call 'em," Maude snapped. "But my girl is going to be something better than a swamp-squatter's wife."

She went out and closed the door hard behind her.

CHAPTER TEN

IT was late the following afternoon and she was completing her office hours when a big-eyed child, ragged and dirty and in obvious terror, pounded into the outer office and cried out, "I gotta see the lady doc. Right now! Pop's 'bout to kill Mom. She's hurt awful bad."

Attracted by the child's frantic screaming, Ruth opened the door of her examination room and asked, "What is it, honey? Don't scream like that!"

"You gotta come quick, Doc, 'fore he plumb kills her," begged the child frantically.

Only two patients remained in the office and both rose instantly.

"You go 'long with Beatsie, Doc. We'll come back tomorrow."

"Thanks. It seems to be an emergency."

Ruth turned back to pick up her black bag, and when she came back into the reception room the child was already out of the room, racing down the street and across the road to the group of hovels behind Walt Hubbard's general merchandise store which the swamp people called "the Tradin' Post."

Ruth heard a woman's anguished scream as she ran past the store, and saw several roughly clad men lounging uneasily on the verandah. But she had no time for more than a passing glance as she

ran past and up the rickety steps of the first hovel, seeing the flash of the child's ragged dress as she ran.

Ruth had interned in a big city charity hospital. She had served her ambulance duty along with the male internes in the city's slums. But she had never come on an uglier scene than the one that struck her like a blow between the eyes.

The one filthy, cluttered room of the hovel had a foul smell, and several small, terrified children huddled in the corners. In the centre of the room, beside an over-turned kitchen table lay a thin, gaunt woman, face down; over her stood a big hulking brute of a man, a thick leather whip in his hand. The woman's back was torn and bleeding, and even as Ruth paused, incredulous with horror, in the doorway, the man lifted the whip again to bring it down on that pitiful back.

Ruth lunged forward and, taking the man by surprise, snatched the whip from him. When he whirled, drunk and foul-tongued, she brought the whip down across his face and his shoulders.

"Hi, what the——" The man's oath was smothered as Ruth struck him again, eyes blazing, her face white with fury.

"You filthy beast!" she said through her teeth. "You rotten brute! Get out of this house this minute—do you hear me?"

The man rubbed his hand across drink-bleared eyes and leered at her, an unpleasant look that took her in from head to foot.

"Well, well, if it ain't the lady doc!" he sneered. "And a right sightly gal she is, too——"

Ruth raised the whip threateningly and motioned toward the door.

"*Get out!*" she ordered, her tone stinging more than the whip-lash could have done.

"And what'll you do if I don't? Sic Hudson and his guys on me?" sneered the man, a faint uneasiness in his eyes.

"I doubt if Mr. Hudson or his men would soil their hands on you, but there are laws to protect women and children." Ruth's tone was thick with cold fury. "Now get out and let me attend to your wife."

She motioned once more with the whip, and the man hesitated, glanced down at the moaning woman on the floor, hitched his overalls up and went slinking out, stumbling a little on the steps and then heading toward the store.

The children were already huddling about the woman on the floor, the child Beatsie looking up at Ruth, pitiful pleading in her tear-filled eyes.

"Mom's hurt bad, ain't she, Doc?" she whispered piteously.

"We'll see, Beatsie. No, we mustn't move her until we are sure how badly she's hurt." Ruth spoke gently to the child and saw the way the others crept closer to Beatsie, big-eyed as they watched her.

Behind Ruth, a voice spoke from the doorway and Maude was there, moving capably, deftly, helping almost with the skill of a trained nurse as Ruth made her examination, found that no bones were broken, and between them they got the woman on the filthy bed.

Shocked and appalled, Ruth saw that there were no sheets on the bed or covers on the pillows.

Maude nodded in answer to Ruth's appalled look and turned briskly to the small huddle of children.

"Beatsie, run over to my place and tell Cathy to give you a pair of sheets and some pillow cases. Reckon some dishcloths wouldn't hurt any, either," she ordered. But her brisk tone was friendly, and Beatsie looked up at her in simple worship.

"Yessum," she said obediently, and then to the others, "You young 'uns git over there in the corner, outen folks' way. I'll be right back."

She scampered out of the door, and Ruth looked down at the moaning woman, whose body was a mass of bruises and scars.

"This isn't the first time this has happened, is it?" she asked Maude, so angry that her tone was husky.

"Land, no! Bud Holcombe's a brute beast that gets drunk every time he can lay his hands on a pint of rotgut and then he takes it out on her," said Maude grimly. "I mind when they were first married. She was such a pretty little thing. Her folks was awful set against her marrying Bud, but she wouldn't listen. He was right handsome then."

For a moment Maude and Ruth exchanged a level-eyed glance without Maude speaking.

"But surely the people in the Harbour here must know about this. Why doesn't anybody stop him?" Ruth demanded.

Maude made a little gesture. "Oh, folks here-

abouts claim it's not healthy to interfere between a man and his wife," she drawled, still with that measuring look.

The child, Beatsie, returned with the sheets, and though Ruth cringed at the thought of putting them on the filthy, worn old mattress, there was nothing else she could do at the moment. Swiftly, with Maude's assistance, she made the bed and eased the patient into its cool, unaccustomed comfort.

The woman moaned and opened her eyes, and Ruth was shocked at the terror that filled them as she looked swiftly about.

"Take it easy, Lydy. Bud's not here," said Maude gently, understanding the woman's terror, which faded beneath Maude's gentle tone.

"Why, it's you, isn't it, Mrs. Elliott?" whispered the woman, and turned her dazed eyes to Ruth, puzzled. "I don't know you, do I?"

"She's Dr. Prescott, that's come to take Dr. Ed's place," said Maude quickly.

"I'm glad to meet you, Dr. Prescott," whispered the woman. "I'm sorry you had to find the place so dirty."

"Now you just hush that kind of talk, Lydy," said Maude firmly. "The children and I will have this place clean as a pin before you can say scat to Big Red. Come on, kids; let's get busy."

Ruth assured herself she had done all that was possible for the patient, and went quietly out. Her eyes were still blazing with wrath, and when she reached Walt Hubbard's store, she went swiftly up the steps and across the verandah.

The men were all inside now, lounging about the place, but they straightened and eyed her warily as she studied each one in turn, until she saw Bud Holcombe, who tried to meet her eyes but found their blazing wrath too much for him.

"Your wife will live, Mr. Holcombe, at least until the next time," she told him, biting her words off, steadying her voice with an effort. "And if there *is* a next time, you can be very sure that you will be arrested and made to pay for your brutality."

Before he could speak, she turned her blazing wrath on the other men.

"What kind of creatures are you, to stand idly by and let a woman be beaten almost to death?" she demanded hotly. "You must have heard her screaming; yet you just stood here, knowing he was probably killing her. You aren't men; you aren't even beasts! I don't know what you are. But whatever you are, it's something the human race should repudiate!"

"Oh, come, now, Doc." Walt Hubbard came from behind the counter, his tone conciliatory, but he stepped back when Ruth turned the full force of her wrath on him.

"And as for you, Mr. Hubbard, those shacks aren't fit for pig-sties! I give you just one week to clean them up and make them fit for human occupancy!"

"And what'll you do if I don't, Doc?" Walt's tone was thin with anger.

"What will I do? Mr. Hubbard, I'll bring the law authorities in here from New Orleans and I'll

see to it that the Harbour is cleaned up from stem to stern!" Ruth assured him.

"Ain't no law coming in here from N'Orleans," muttered somebody uneasily.

"Oh, you think not?" Ruth turned and searched the group, trying to find the one who had muttered. "When I inform them that there are moon-shining, illegal destruction of protected wild fowl, and a great many other evils, as well as wife-beating and violation of all the health and sanitation codes, I'm sure there will be a lot of law here, especially if Mr. Copeland joins me, as I'm sure he will. He promised me his full co-operation if I'd take this job. All I have to do is notify him what's going on here and you may be quite sure that the Harbour will be cleaned up and made a decent place for decent people to live."

"Oh, now, Doc, we don't want any trouble," Walt protested, alarm in his eyes.

"Don't you?" Ruth was breathing hard and for the first time felt uneasiness beneath the dark, ugly looks of these men. "Then you'll get busy and clean up those shacks. And if I hear of just one more case of wife-beating—or child-beating—you'll all be very, very sorry, I promise you that!"

"Oh, sure, Doc, sure. But it's not altogether my fault that shacks look so bad. The women are a lazy, slovenly bunch——" Walt began.

"I'll hold you personally responsible!" Ruth assured him grimly, "I am going to ask Father Bergstrom to help me form a local health board, and with all the decent people in the Harbour

behind us, I think things are going to be quite different here! They'd better be!"

Once more her eyes swung around the group, holding each one until his eyes fell away from hers. Then she turned and marched out. Behind her as she went down the steps and started across the road, she heard a confused babble of angry voices, and felt her knees shake just a little. She had really given them a dressing down; and they were dark and ugly brutes. If she had to make a night call some night—

She shivered as she reached the gate of the Elliott place. Len, who had been sitting on the steps waiting for her, rose and came to meet her.

Startled, he cried, "Why, what's wrong? You look as if you'd been scared out of your wits."

For a moment she clung to him, and then she laughed shakily and pulled herself together.

"I've been through rather a session."

"At the Flats? Ruth, you shouldn't have gone there alone. They're a tough bunch," he protested.

She laughed and pushed her fingers through her hair.

"Well, I was so blindly furious I gave them all a tongue-lashing—all of them in Hubbard's store, anyway. I'm not sure how they will take it," she admitted. "I made some pretty wild threats, such as getting Mr. Copeland to send law enforcement officers in here to clean up the place."

"Hi, that *was* a pretty wild threat!"

She looked up at him swiftly.

"You don't think I can carry it through?"

"Oh, I suppose so, if you ask Copeland to help—

but isn't that pretty drastic? I mean we've always been—well, rather self-sufficient about our affairs here."

"Even when a brute-beast like Bud Holcombe beats his wife almost to death?" There was a thin edge in her voice.

Len's jaw hardened and his eyes glinted.

"So he's at it again, is he?"

Ruth's eyes widened.

"You mean he does it often?" she protested hotly.

"Oh, sure! Only she always sides with Bud; and after people interfere he's always meaner than ever."

"But he might kill her the next time!"

"In which case he'd be hung, and he knows it. No, he knows just when to stop."

Ruth gasped, white with anger, "Are you standing there trying to tell me you condone——"

Len said hastily, "Hi, put down that gun! Nobody condones anything; twice the sheriff has come over from the county seat to arrest him, and each time Lydia takes up for him. And then when he's gone, and her neighbours are ready to read her off, she always says that she can't take care of the children without his wages. Which, of course, is true. Only there's not much of his wages that the children and Lydia get, I'm afraid."

Ruth said grimly, "Well, I warned him. And I warned Walt Hubbard that if those shacks aren't fixed up and made fit for humans to live in I'd make him very, very sorry."

There was for a moment the ghost of a twinkle in Len's eyes.

"And just what do you think you could do to make him sorry?" he suggested.

Ruth's colour rose, but she met his eyes defiantly.

"I threatened to get Father Bergstrom to help me form a board of health, arouse all the decent citizens, and enforce some of the health laws, as well as get the law enforcement officers in."

Len nodded. "Now *that* is a threat that will have effect. None of the people in the Flats wants the law to come in. There are quite a few activities here that wouldn't stand too close an investigation by the law."

"But why do you permit such things?" Ruth demanded.

Len stared at her, his brows slightly raised, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Well, *thanks*," he murmured gratefully.

"Thanks? For what?"

"For believing that I have enough authority to control conditions here at the Harbour. I wish I did. Unfortunately, I have less authority than you have."

"Being a stranger here, I couldn't hope to accomplish anything without your help, since you're the Harbour's most substantial citizen," Ruth pointed out.

She hesitated a moment and then she said impulsively, "I *do* want Holcombe restrained. But I don't want you to get into trouble about it."

Len looked down at her, and in the dying sun-

set light there was a curious, enigmatic expression in his eyes that she could not quite read.

"Don't you? Now that's very sweet of you. I'm grateful," he told her.

"Oh, don't make fun of me! You're always ridiculing me." She caught her breath on the resentful tone in her voice, and turned her eyes away from him, attempting to brush past him.

He laid his hand swiftly on her arm, and now he was in deadly earnest, his eyes grave and steady on hers, holding a look that suddenly jerked her heart to startled attention.

"I'd never make fun of you, Ruth—never! And as for ridiculing you—that thought was the farthest thing from my mind. I admire you tremendously; never more so than when you start crusading against Walt Hubbard and his rotten gang. I may think you're a bit reckless to have lashed out at him; but I admire you for it. Tremendously." His tone was deep and vibrant. "In fact, I admire you tremendously for a great many things. May I tell you about some of them some day when we've had time to get better acquainted?"

Startled by the intensity of his manner as much as by the warmth in his eyes, Ruth caught her breath and felt her face go hot with colour.

"I have to tell Cathy that Maude won't be here in time to serve supper, so I'd better go," she stammered, and pulled free from his touch, which was so gentle she had no difficulty in breaking it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was inevitable that Maude would use the Holcombe business as further fuel for her bitterness against a marriage between Cathy and Lafe. It would do no good to try to convince her that Lafe was no longer a squatter, but a man who had proven his worth in defence of his country and was a steadily employed and apparently well-adjusted wage-earner.

Life, Ruth told herself as she took off her soiled uniform and dropped it into a clothes hamper, could become very, very complicated indeed when two people fell in love. And for a moment, because she was tired and bothered, the thought of David came to her. But resolutely she put it away from her, and set her mouth in a thin grim line. She would *not* think of David! She had plenty to occupy her mind here, and David belonged to the past.

When the supper bell rang she came down the stairs to find the men waiting for her back of their chairs in the dining-room, and she smiled a greeting as one of them held her chair for her and she looked up at him, to meet Lafe's bashful but friendly grin.

"Oh, they taught us some manners in the army." He grinned at her surprise. "I admit I haven't been living up to all they taught me, but give me time. It'll come back to me."

"I'm sure it will, and thanks," Ruth assured him.

Lafe took his place, and Cathy and Mrs. Corwin, who was helping in Maude's absence, began serving the meal. The meat and vegetables, in huge bowls and platters, was already on the table, but Cathy and Mrs. Corwin moved about the table, serving piping-hot biscuits with the traditional Southern admonition, "Take two, and butter 'em while they're hot," and seeing to it that bowls and platters were replenished as they emptied.

There was little of the usual light-hearted talk and laughter about the table tonight, and the men ate swiftly and silently. When at last they thrust back their chairs and rose, it was once again Lafe who addressed Ruth. He seemed to have conquered his bashfulness, she noted with pleased surprise.

"We're all looking forward to the shindig tomorrow night, Miss Doc. We hope we can show you a good time. If we don't, it won't be for lack of trying."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Macklin!" Ruth saw the colour mount brick-red behind his sun-bronze that was the colour of a well-polished saddle.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Miss Doc.—not 'Mr. Macklin.' My name is Lafe, and my old man is Mr. Macklin," he protested.

"Oh, no he isn't, Lafe. He's Jared. He told me so himself!" Ruth laughed and Lafe laughed with her as he followed the other men out, leaving

only Len who still lounged at the foot of the table opposite Ruth.

Cathy and Mrs. Corwin came in and sat down, and Cathy helped herself desultorily to the food before her.

"I declare to goodness," said Mrs. Corwin heartily as she dug a fork into her well-laden plate, "I don't see how in time Maude stands it, shovelling food down you men without having a bite herself. If one more of your fellows had asked for another biscuit, I'd have slapped him."

"That's your own fault," Len reminded her gravely. "You shouldn't make such good biscuits."

"Oh, they were no better than Maude's," protested Mrs. Corwin, obviously pleased. "There's no better cook in the Harbour than Maude."

There was the sound of voices, footsteps in the hall, and then Maude herself came in, herding a group of big-eyed ragged youngsters whose faces shone with soap and water but whose brief bits of ragged clothing was filthy dirty.

"Got anything left for a passel of starved kids, Cathy?" Maude was carrying the youngest Holcombe child, who couldn't have been more than a year old. "Here, kids, set yourselves down. Oh, hello, Len, you still eating? I waited as long as I could so's everybody would be through. But these poor kids were just about starved. Sit down there, kids, anywhere you like."

The children, wide-eyed before the array of food on the table, shuffled into chairs, and Mrs. Corwin rose swiftly to fill their plates.

"Cathy, fix me up a tray to take to Lydy and

that poor baby Beatsie. She wouldn't leave her Mom for fear that good-for-nothin' brute of a husband would come back," said Maude. "Bet if he does he won't recognize the place. He's never seen it so clean before, but being the hog he is, he won't appreciate it."

"If you'll get the tray ready, Cathy, I'd consider it an honour and a privilege to be allowed to take it over to Mrs. Holcombe and Beatrice," said Len grimly.

Maude looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Now don't you start nothing with Bud, Len! He's a dangerous critter when the likker's in him. And I don't reckon there's ever been a time, not since they was first married, when it wasn't!" she warned uneasily.

"Oh, I'll be very careful of his delicate sensibilities," said Len dryly.

When Cathy came back with a laden tray, neatly covered with a clean napkin, Ruth stood up as Len accepted the tray.

"I'll go with you. I'd like to have another look at her anyway. I'll get my case."

Together, Len carrying the laden napkin-covered tray, Ruth her black instrument bag, they walked through the moonlight across the wide road, and past the brilliantly illuminated Trading Post, from which there came the raucous sound of a juke-box labouring away at rock 'n' roll music. Through the dirty windows, they could glimpse a group of men, all standing close together in intent conversation.

In the darkness that swept down upon them

the moment they passed the Trading Post, Len stumbled and swore under his breath. Ruth touched the button on her flash-light and a brilliant circle of white light sprang out before them, guiding them to the steps of the shack.

As they reached the door, Beatsie's frightened voice called out quaveringly, "Who is it?"

"Santa Claus," answered Len.

"It ain't neither. Santy Claus don't come to see folks like us," Beatsie called back.

Ruth caught her breath at the matter-of-fact bleakness of that, and raised her voice, "It's Dr. Prescott, Beatsie, and Mr. Hudson."

A heavy bar slid back from the door, and Beatsie peered out at them, like some small frightened animal out of its burrow, and cried out with delight, swinging the door wide.

Len carried the tray inside, and the child sniffed, her eyes enormous in her pinched, small white face.

"You brought Mom and me some vittles?" she whispered as if she could not believe such a miracle could happen. "Is Miss Maude feeding the kids?"

"Stuffing them like little tadpoles," Len assured her. He put the tray down on the table beside the old kerosene oil lamp that gave its feeble light through a glass chimney that had probably never been so clean since it first came from the store. "You pull up a chair and dive in, youngster, while Miss Doc sees what your mother can have."

Ruth was bending over Lydia, using her flash-

light for her examination, murmuring soothingly and gently as her deft hands completed their task.

"She can have a glass of milk and some of that soup and a buttered biscuit to begin with," said Ruth, smiling.

"I don't think I could eat much. I don't get hungry any more," said Lydia shyly.

"That's account of she never eats anything for fear us kids won't have enough," said Beatsie, through a mouthful of food, tears trickling down her small, scrubbed face. "Reckon maybe she's forgot how to eat, seein' she don't get much practice."

"Things are going to be different from now on, Beatrice, I promise you," said Len firmly.

Quick terror brushed the child's face, and Lydia choked on the hot chicken soup Ruth was carefully spooning into her mouth.

"You aimin' to start something with Pop?" gasped Beatsie, in such frantic terror that Ruth was shocked. "He'll just take it out on us if you do. He'll beat Mom something awful—and us, too."

"In which case I shall take a great personal pleasure in killing him with my bare hands," stated Len so grimly, so flatly, that even Ruth was startled and aghast. And then, seeing the white terror in Beatsie's face, hearing the small moan with which Lydia turned her face away and refused to eat any more, he looked at Ruth and lifted his shoulders. "See what I mean?"

"Lydia, listen to me," said Ruth gently, her voice warm and coaxing. "I had a talk with the

men in the Trading Post this afternoon. I have promised them what will happen if Hubbard doesn't clean up the Flats; and I promised Bud what I'd do to him if he ever raised a finger against you or the children."

Lydia made a sound that was half-way between an hysterical laugh and a sob.

"You've promised them! What could a scrap of a thing like you promise those brutes that would make them do anything?" she whispered.

"I promised to bring law enforcement officers in here to clean the place up and to establish a board of health, operating under the County Health laws——" began Ruth.

Len had come to stand behind Ruth, and he was looking down at Lydia almost sternly.

"Of course, Lydia, you've got a job to do, too—unless you want to go on the way you've gone these last ten years—seeing your children hungry and ragged and abused. Whether Miss Doc can straighten things out or not is chiefly up to you and the other women here in the Flats. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Lydia shrank from him, her face blue-white against the pillow, the bruises on her face and throat and shoulders glowing darkly angry against the pallor.

"You mean I've got to stand up against him; fight back because of the children?" she breathed as though it were a terrifying prospect.

"I mean exactly that, Lydia," Len told her, and added quietly, "But you won't be alone, Lydia. We'll all help you. Miss Doc here has started the

ball rolling. The rest of us who have been just sitting here doing nothing while conditions get worse and worse have been aroused, and we are determined that things are going to be different. We'll back you and the other women in the Flats to the limit; but you've got to help, too."

Lydia looked at Beatsie, who sat big-eyed, white-faced, but eating like a starving little animal, while great tears flowed down her face.

"I'll help, and I'm thanking you right kindly, Miss Doc, and Mr. Len," said Lydia huskily.

"You've got to promise us, Lydia, that if the sheriff comes over from the county seat to arrest Bud, you won't take up for him and refuse to press charges——"

"I promise," whispered Lydia, and there was a new spark in her eyes and a faint but promising new strength in her voice as she gave her word. "I see now I've got to protect the children."

"That's the girl," said Len heartily. "Of course you do, Lydia. And you will, I know."

"I'll try, Mr. Len. I'll surely try," promised Lydia.

"Good!" Len patted the thin, bruised shoulder with a touch so gentle it was a caress. "And Miss Doc and I will keep an eye on things. That's a promise, too."

"I'm ashamed you found the place such a mess, Miss Doc," Lydia apologized awkwardly, "I just haven't seemed to have the strength to keep things looking nice."

Ruth swung a swift glance about the old, dilapidated cabin and nodded.

"I can understand that, Lydia. But as Mr. Hudson promised, things are going to be different from now on," said Ruth with feeling.

She turned to Beatsie, smiling warmly at her, and saw the emptied plates and a neatly wrapped small bundle beside them. Beatsie met her eyes and flushed and looked away.

"There was so much, Miss Doc, and everything was so good, that I saved some for the others tomorrow," she admitted huskily.

"That's fine, Beatsie. But tomorrow there will be more, I promise you," said Ruth and turned to Len. "Well, shall we be going?"

"I don't know how to thank you." Lydia's voice was husky.

"Don't try. I'm a doctor and this is part of my job," Ruth assured her gently.

"I don't know how I'm going to pay you, Miss Doc——"

"Suppose you wait until you get my bill, Lydia. That will be time enough to worry about it. I'll see you tomorrow," Ruth said lightly.

As she and Len went down the rickety steps and into the thick darkness that smelled of pigsties and swamp-water and other smells Ruth's nose tried not to identify, she drew a deep breath and her fists clenched.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN Ruth finished her office hours the next afternoon, she came out of her private office to find the reception room empty save for Father Bergstrom, who hustled to his feet at sight of her, his kind, ruddy old face beaming.

"My dear, dear child," he greeted her warmly. "I have just heard what you did yesterday. I can't tell you how happy I am to know you are joining me in my fight to trim Walt Hubbard's wicked claws!"

Ruth laughed. "Oh, you mean Lydia Holcombe and the children."

Father Bergstrom eyed her with vast admiration.

"I hear you did something I've been longing to do, but my cloth restrained me from doing," he said. "I hear you've horse-whipped Bud Holcombe."

Ruth coloured. "I'm afraid it wasn't much of a horse-whipping," she said. "I was so angry when I walked in and saw him lashing that poor woman that I took him by surprise—myself, too. I hadn't known I could lose my temper so completely."

"I admire you for it very much," Father Bergstrom told her, "and for what you said to the men in Walt Hubbard's place. It's too bad, of course, that we can't make good on your threats."

"And why can't we?" demanded Ruth sharply.

"You think I haven't tried?" Father Bergstrom

sighed. "The county authorities move in; all is sweetness and light while they are here; all the illegal activities go underground. And after two or three visits from the authorities, with nothing illegal discovered, they refuse to accept any more requests for an investigation."

"Then," said Ruth firmly, "I'll write to Mr. Copeland."

Startled, Father Bergstrom asked, "You think he'd be interested enough to take a hand?"

"I feel sure of it," said Ruth, firmly, and crossed her fingers and wished she felt as sure as she sounded. "Anyway, I'll get a letter off to him by the next mail boat."

Father Bergstrom beamed.

"My dear child, that's wonderful! That's perfectly wonderful!" he enthused, and added eagerly, "The thing to do is get the co-operation of the women in the Flats. The mothers, like Lydia Holcombe."

"We can count definitely on Lydia."

He looked uneasy.

"I hope so, my dear, I hope so."

"But she gave Len and me her word last night——"

"And when Bud came home she changed her mind."

"Have you seen her?"

Father Bergstrom nodded.

"I went there as soon as I got back from my parish rounds, and heard the news," he told her gently. "She is so terrified of Bud that she wouldn't dare raise her voice to denounce him."

"But those poor half-starved, ragged children——"

"I know—it's like that all through the Flats. Children so ragged and dirty they can't even go to school; mothers so terrified of their husbands that they don't dare insist that the children be cleaned up and sent. And the decent people of the Harbour refuse to allow their children to associate, even in school, with children from the Flats, because of filth and the fear of disease and contagion."

Ruth dropped into a chair and ran her fingers through her hair, bewildered and increasingly angry.

"But, Father Bergstrom, this is preposterous! It's absurd! Why, this is America, the United States, in the year 1956! Not a hundred years ago in some foreign, backward country!" she protested.

Father Bergstrom sighed heavily.

"I know. It doesn't seem possible, does it? I've been here ten years, and I've been banging my head against the situation ever since I came here."

"Is there any way we could get the people of the Harbour together and tell them what we want to do, and enlist their help?" Ruth wondered aloud, pacing the office, her hands jammed deeply into the pockets of her white uniform, her brow furrowed.

"I understand there's to be a hoe-down in your honour at the camp tonight," suggested Father Bergstrom. "I have been hearing about it for the last two days, and imagine that practically

everybody will be there. Perhaps not the people from the Flats nor too many of the swamp-squatters, but what is lightly known as 'the better element' from the Harbour."

"A hoe-down?" Ruth repeated, and remembered Len's suggestion that they were holding a party for her at the camp. "Why, yes, I do remember now. You'll be there, Father Bergström?"

He grinned at her like a small, mischievous boy.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm not expected. Usually, this time of the week, I'm at the opposite end of the parish, holding services at one of the other churches. But though I'm afraid my presence at the party may dampen a few of the more unruly spirits, I'll be there!" he promised.

"Len is with us, too," she reminded him.

Father Bergstrom lowered his eyes.

"Oh, yes." His voice was thin, faintly touched with frost. "I was forgetting Len."

"Well, we mustn't," Ruth said vigorously. "As the employer of the majority of the well-paid workers who make the Harbour's prosperity possible, I'd say he was a very important part of our plans."

"If," stated Father Bergstrom quietly, "we can depend on him."

Indignation flooded Ruth. "Why, what a terrible thing to say. Of course we can depend on him."

She caught the twinkle in Father Bergstrom's eyes and felt her face go hot.

"Well, of course, I daresay you know him much better than I do," he said gently.

"I do know him well enough to know he's a perfectly wonderful person and that we can count on him to the limit," said Ruth curtly.

"Good. Then with you, Len and what feeble assistance I can offer, we may be able to get somewhere," said Father Bergstrom, and beamed at her.

"Am I being paged?" asked Len from the doorway, and Ruth whirled and caught her breath and wondered how much he had heard. "I thought I heard my name."

"You did, Len, of course. Come in. Miss Doc here was telling me what a wonderful person you are," said Father Bergstrom pleasantly, the twinkle dancing mischievously in his eyes. "I was happy to hear it."

"Hello, Padre—so am I! I can return the compliment and tell you Miss Doc is about the nicest thing that ever happened to Copeland Harbour," said Len, and his eyes were warm upon Ruth, who could not quite meet their gaze and turned away.

"I've been telling Father Bergstrom about our efforts to clean up the Flats." She spoke over her shoulder. "I suggested that we tell the people at the party tonight what we have in mind. He's not sure that's a good idea."

Len looked puzzled. "Why not? Sounds like a wonderful idea to me. What better chance are you likely to have to speak to practically the entire population at one time? A sort of mass meeting of the citizenry."

"Father Bergstrom feels that it might be re-

sented; might even put a damper on the spirits of the party," Ruth pointed out.

"I'm afraid you misjudge our local citizenry, Padre," said Len pleasantly. "It will give them something to think about, and something to talk about. Nobody here has enjoyed watching what Walt Hubbard is doing, but we've lacked a leader with the crusading spirit. I think we have that leader now, in Miss Doc."

Father Bergstrom beamed happily.

"I'm glad to hear it, Len. I'll be delighted to be there. I'm quite looking forward to it," he told them. "Now I'd better be getting back to the parish-house and get cleaned up from my journey. I'll see you both at the party—or may I drive you out, Miss Doc?"

"Miss Doc will drive out with me, thanks," said Len firmly before Ruth could answer. "We're going to stop on the way and pick up Miss Lily. You don't mind, Ruth?"

"Mind? Of course not! I'd love to meet her," Ruth assured him, and Father Bergstrom nodded and bustled out.

Len stood for a moment eyeing Ruth as she pretended to busy herself with a pile of papers on her desk.

"What's all this about my being a wonderful person?" he asked at last when she showed no inclination to turn and face him.

"You were eavesdropping," she accused him.

"Don't evade! Sure. I heard my name as I was crossing the hall, and I stopped to see if I needed to offer any defence. But you did such a beautiful

job I wanted to thank you." His tone was pleasant, but she dared not turn around to face perhaps a mocking look in his eyes.

"Father Bergstrom seemed doubtful whether we could depend on you—and I assured him that we could, to the limit." She still spoke over her shoulder. "You must have heard."

"Turn around and look at me, Ruth." His tone was quiet, but there was a note in it that forced her to obey.

She turned slowly, reluctantly, and with an effort raised her eyes to his. What she saw in their depths jerked her heart to a swift, tumultuous beat, and she could no longer endure the look.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Ruth." His voice was a low, husky sound that was like gentle fingers touching her heart. "I'm not going to do or say anything that you don't want me to do or say. But some day when you've put that other guy out of your heart—I'm going to ask you to let me come in and make myself at home, for as long as we both shall live. Don't forget that, Ruth—*please!*"

And before she could manage her startled faculties to make an answer, he had turned on his heel and she heard him go up the stairs, and then the sound of his door closing behind him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"SORRY I couldn't have arranged for the moon to be held over," said Len cheerfully as they drove out the wide white sand road toward the camp. "But it rises much later now and is only half a moon."

"I didn't expect even you to manage to hold over the moon." She laughed, ill at ease with him because she could not quite put the memory of that disturbing moment earlier in her office out of her mind.

"But I *am* dependable in other ways, remember? You said so yourself," he reminded her, and in the darkness inside the car she could only guess at his expression.

"Tell me about the party," she suggested breathlessly.

"Oh, it's just a dance and a reception so you can meet all the healthy people whom you haven't met in your rounds so far," he told her, and there was a hint of laughter in his voice that warned her he was perfectly aware of her uneasiness and entirely conscious of the reason for it. "The fellows have been preparing for it all week. They're going to be very disappointed if you don't have a wonderful time."

"But of course I will! How could anybody not have a good time when so much kindness and thoughtfulness has gone into preparing for a

party?" said Ruth, and added, "I was surprised when I found you were taking Miss Lily. Surprised and pleased."

"Oh, Miss Lily would be heartbroken if she ever missed a party at the lumber camp." He chuckled. "She's a great old girl. You'll like her; that is, once you get past her prickles and her tartness."

"Are you telling me that she has a heart of gold in spite of a sharp tongue?"

"Something like that, I suppose," he admitted.

When he entered the overgrown lane leading to the big white house, the headlights picked the way for them through dense darkness, and the house was no more than a pale glimmer as they drove past it and the powerful headlight beam focused on a sturdy-looking, very old cabin.

Seated on the steps was a tiny old lady in voluminous black, her hair snow-white and luxuriant, making a startling crown above her tiny, wizened face.

"Well, it's about time you got here, Len Hudson." Her voice was thin and waspish as Len got out of the car and went toward her. "I've been sitting here dressed and ready and patten' my foot since first dark. Here 'tis 'most bedtime, and you just showing up."

"I'm sorry, Miss Lily. Let me help you." Len put a gentle hand beneath her elbow, and the old woman got to her feet. She shook off his hand.

"I thank you. I can help myself," she told him sternly, as though she resented the necessity of

accepting even so much of his help. "Who's that you've got in the car with you?"

"Dr. Prescott, the new doctor. Ruth, this is Miss Lily."

"Get out and stand in the light so I can see you," ordered the old woman in a tone that brooked no denial.

"Of course," said Ruth, and smiled warmly at the old woman. "I'm very happy to meet you, Miss Lily. I've heard a great deal about you."

"And I'll bet most of it was a pack of lies," sniffed the old woman, and eyed Ruth sharply. "You're a mighty pretty girl to be a doctor. Bet these fellows around here buzz around you like bees."

Ruth laughed. "I'm afraid I haven't had to use a baseball bat to keep them away," she admitted.

"Well, that's because they all know you're Len's girl and it wouldn't be healthy for them to take after you," said Miss Lily. Ruth gasped, but before she could speak, Miss Lily was climbing into the car. "Well, don't just stand there with your mouth open, Ruth. Come on; let's get started or the party will be over before we can get there."

"They wouldn't dare start until you get there, Miss Lily," Len said gravely, and Ruth caught his smothered chuckle and went hot with anger. The outrageous old woman! Len's girl, indeed!

Miss Lily sniffed disdainfully.

"Sweet talk'll get you nowhere with me, Len Hudson," she assured him. "I'm not letting you 'timber' any of my land and that's final."

"Then I suppose we'll have to shut down the

veneer mill," said Len gravely. "Not enough cedar to keep it going."

"That won't have no effect on me, either," said Miss Lily, obviously enjoying her sense of importance. "Serves you right for cutting down all the cedars for miles around. Guess you'll just have to wait 'til those spindly little new ones you've been setting out comes to their full growth."

"I'm afraid so," admitted Len, and then briskly, "But let's not talk business tonight. This is a play-party, Miss Lily."

"What do you think of the Harbour, Ruth?" demanded Miss Lily, her tone elegantly conversational, excluding Len.

"What I've seen of it, I both like and dislike," admitted Ruth.

"That means you've run into Walt Hubbard and his crowd," said Miss Lily. "Ought to be run clean out of the Harbour and drowned. But I guess that might poison the fish. And with folks mostly making their living out of the fishing, that wouldn't do much good."

"Ruth has an idea about forcing Walt to clean up the Flats——" Len began cautiously.

Miss Lily's snort was definitely not a refined or ladylike sound.

"Pity—she looks like a right sensible girl," she commented dryly.

"You think it can't be done, Miss Lily?" asked Ruth.

"It's been tried before," said Miss Lily.

"But never before with a leader like Ruth to spark the crusade," Len reminded her.

"You think she can succeed where the others, including Father Bergstrom, have failed?"

"I do! I have implicit confidence in Ruth."

"Oh, well, that's because you are in love with her," Miss Lily sniffed, and Ruth gasped, feeling her face go hot.

"Well, I suppose that does have something to do with my confidence in her," Len agreed. And although she could not see his face in the darkness, Ruth knew that his eyes were twinkling and she could catch the ghost of a chuckle in his voice.

"I think we can get the backing of the decent element of the people," said Ruth curtly, "when we have convinced them that conditions in the Flats could easily cause a disease, an epidemic that would not stay in the Flats! When other people discover that their own families, their own children are endangered by health conditions, I feel sure they will be glad to pitch in and help clean the place up."

Miss Lily was quite serious now.

"You may have a point there, girl," she agreed thoughtfully. "Those shacks, built right out there in the edge of the marshes, with all the filthy housekeeping the women there in the Flats do—why, it could easy as not start an epidemic."

"Then you'll pitch in with us, Miss Lily?" demanded Len.

Ruth could feel the small, frail body beside her tense, and she saw the white head turn unbelievably toward Len.

"Me?" Miss Lily gasped as though not at all sure that she had heard him.

"Well, of course, Miss Lily." Len was deeply in earnest. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

"But a crazy old woman like me, Len—what good would I be to you?" protested Miss Lily, as though the idea were so fantastic she could scarcely credit it.

"You're not a crazy old woman, Miss Lily——"

"You'd have yourself a time, boy, convincing anybody else in the settlement that I'm not," she reminded him in that dry tone that seemed a characteristic of hers.

"Oh, of course I know you get a kick out of frightening people into thinking you are crazy——"

Startled, Miss Lily protested, "Now where in the world did you ever get an idea like that, Len Hudson?"

Len chuckled.

"Oh, I've been on to your little scheme for a long time, Miss Lily," he assured her. "But it's our secret—yours, R 'h's and mine. I know you want people to be afraid of you, so *you* don't have to be afraid of living here alone."

"I'm not afraid of anything on two legs! I'm too good a shot to have to be!" Miss Lily cut in sharply, yet in her voice there was the faintest possible trace of uneasiness. "You've seen my gun, Len Hudson."

"Sure. And I know that you could scarcely lift it, let alone shoot it. And you wouldn't anyway—you'd be too much afraid of hurting somebody. And so you broadcast far and wide that you're a

poor, crazy old woman without enough money to buy the necessities of life. That keeps you from being molested by burglars or anybody looking for something of value."

"There's never more than a couple of dollars, cash money, in my house at any time, Len Hudson, and you know it." The quaver in her voice was more pronounced, and Len slowed the car and took one hand from the wheel and laid it on the small, gnarled, claw-like hands that were tightly clenched in her lap.

"Miss Lily honey, I'm not trying to frighten you," he soothed her gently. "I'm only trying to tell you that *I* know your mind is as clear as a bell and that this pretence of being crazy is simply self-protection. I give you my word neither Ruth nor I will ever betray your secret."

Miss Lily drew a long, quivering breath.

"You're a good boy, Len. I've always said so and I always will," she said, and then with sudden emphasis, "Only you're *not* going to get my timber!"

"Of course not," Len said pleasantly. "I don't want it any longer. I don't need it."

Once more Ruth, who had merely sat and listened, marvelling at the two, felt the old woman's body go tense and saw her head turn sharply toward Len.

"You don't need it? Now what kind of hoot-nanny talk is that, Len Hudson? You *do* need it, and you're trying to butter me up and soft-soap me so's you can sneak up on my blind side and buy it when I don't know what I'm doing!" she snapped.

"One more crack like that, Miss Lily, and I swear Ruth and I will put you out of the car right here and make you walk!" Len threatened.

Miss Lily sniffed.

"Think you're scaring me? I can foot it down this road as good as any of your fine young men! Many's the time I've walked it! And I've got eyes like a cat; I can see in the dark as well as the next one."

"But you hurt me, Miss Lily, when you accuse me of trying to wheedle you out of your land! I've offered you a very good price."

"Oh, I know you wouldn't cheat me, Len. But you say you don't need the timber. Well, I don't need the money," Miss Lily assured him. "Money's stuff I don't have much use for anyway; scarcely ever use it."

Ahead of them the camp was aglow with light, and Len chuckled at Miss Lily as he drove the car in through the wide entrance way and parked it.

They were greeted with welcoming cries, and people gathered around, and Ruth saw some of the people she had met. A few were or had been patients; she also saw some who hovered in the background, eyeing her as warily as wild animals. And among these she soon saw the Macklin family and crossed immediately to them.

"How nice to see you all." She smiled and put an arm about one of the smaller girls, at which the little girl wiggled shyly but with delight. "Eunice, you look magnificent."

It was quite true, for while Eunice's dress was

ancient of cut, the material was excellent; a dark, rich-looking silk sprinkled with tiny green flowers, the square, modestly cut neckline trimmed with narrow, creamy lace.

"Well, thank you, Miss Doc. I reckon I'm no fashion plate. Folks here don't seem to think so, nohow. But this dress was my mammy's and her mammy's before me. So I reckon it's good enough for a shindig in the piney woods."

There was more than a trace of defiance in Eunice's voice as she tossed her head, wound with the copper-coloured braids that were her greatest beauty.

"You'd be surprised, perhaps, to know that the dress is a very good style for nowadays—back interest, the fashion designers call that bustle effect and the train!" Ruth assured her.

Eunice's eyes widened in simple astonishment.

"Well, now is that a fact?" she marvelled. "Seems like them fashion people coulda thought up somethin' newer than this in all the years!"

"If all women looked as well in the style as you do, Eunice, I'd applaud it heartily. But some women look—well, a bit peculiar!"

"I mind mammy tellin' me when I was just a gal that they was women could wear bustles and women couldn't; only they all had to," Eunice laughed.

She turned to some women who stood back of her, and said proudly, "I'd like to make you acquainted, Miss Doc, with some friends and neighbours of mine."

The women were shy but friendly, and Ruth

chatted with them until Len came to claim her for a square dance.

"I like them," she told Len as they waited for the music to begin. "Eunice's friends, I mean."

"They're good people. I'm glad you're having a chance to find out that *all* squatters aren't like Walt Hubbard," Len assured her.

"They're squatters? Like the Macklins?"

"Sure, didn't you know? Haven't you seen what a wide path the Harbour people cut around them? Rotten, but there it is. The Harbour people despise swamp-squatters; the swamp-squatters hold the towners in contempt. In a place the size of this you'd think all the inhabitants could be friends; but then I suppose it's just part of the contrariness of human kind in general," admitted Len. "This is the only place where they ever meet on what you might call common ground. The Macklins come because Lafe works here, the other squatter families come because they have sons working here. And don't look at me like that; I can't help it if oil and water won't mix. It isn't because I haven't tried!"

Ruth blinked. "Was I looking at you—like what?"

But the music struck up then and there was no more time for conversation. Ruth had hard work keeping up with the intricate pattern of the dance, even with Len to guide her through its rollicking paces; and suddenly she saw Miss Lily, white head high, one claw-like hand elegantly lifting the voluminous skirts of her rusty black dress, the other held in Jared's hand, as they danced, with

every evidence of keen, childlike enjoyment. Miss Lily was laughing, bright-eyed, and her footwork was beautiful to see.

"Oh, I want to watch this," she breathed to Len, and they slipped out of the set, as many other pairs were doing, to stand around the dance floor, clapping their hands as Jared and Miss Lily took the centre of the floor.

"I told you she was a fabulous character, didn't I?" Len whispered to Ruth, laughing a little at her delight.

"She's a darling," said Ruth, without taking her eyes off the old lady who was dancing like a feather in the breeze, radiant and happy as Jared beamed at her, and swung her heartily as they came together and drifted apart.

When the music ended there was a tumult of applause, and Miss Lily looked about, as though startled to find herself the centre of attention.

"I'm thankin' you, Miss Lily," said Jared with a deep, old-fashioned bow. "That was a mighty fine dance. You're a fine dancer, Miss Lily."

Miss Lily looked up at him with sparkling eyes.

"So're you, Jared, so're you!" she told him breathlessly, and patted his sleeve lightly. "I enjoyed it."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THERE was a sudden clangour of a bell from outside and the crowd broke up, laughing, trooping outside, and Len looked down at Ruth.

"That means the shrimp mull is ready and supper is about to be served," he assured her. "May I have the pleasure, ma'am?"

He bowed, and offered his arm.

"What, in Heaven's name," asked Ruth softly, "is shrimp mull? That's a drink I've never heard of."

"I'm shocked at your ignorance, gal. Shrimp mull isn't a drink; it's a dish. I once heard a man, when they had described the concoction of the dish, say, 'Oh, it's like a fish chowder!' Fortunately, the mail boat was due next day so he escaped with his life!" Len assured her gravely.

Outside, huge tables had been set up beneath two big trees, brilliantly illuminated by two floodlights among the tree branches. On the tables, there were stacks of paper plates, plastic knives, forks and spoons, and a quantity of paper cups. Near the table, a huge iron pot simmered above a fire of bright coals, and the steam that escaped from it was the most delicious fragrance Ruth had ever smelled from a cook-pot.

Up and down the tables there were platters of hard, crusty bread, and vast bowls of pickles and a variety of sea-food. There was a great deal of

laughter, and people crowded about the tables and filled their plates; but even out here around the tables, Ruth saw that the squatter families kept strictly to themselves.

Len brought her a laden plate and one for himself and found a spot for them on the steps of one of the bunkhouses where they could eat.

"I understand buffet service is the fashion for out of door eating," he assured her gravely. "Truth is, we didn't have enough chairs to make it a formal, sit-down dinner; so everybody loads a plate, fills a cup and finds a place to sit and dives in."

Ruth dug a fork into the contents of her plate, savoured it and said lightly, "And very good diving it is, too."

Len smiled at her warmly.

"I felt sure you would like it," he seemed, quite pleased.

From behind them inside the dimly lit bunkhouse there came the sound of a baby's wailing, and instantly a woman separated herself from the crowd around the table and came hurrying up, brushing past them with an apologetic smile as she went into the bunkhouse. The baby's wailing ceased.

"I'll never cease to marvel at how a woman can single out her own child's cry from that of half a dozen his age!" he admitted. "There are at least a dozen babies in there, from a few months old to two or three years. Yet the moment Mary Sue heard the baby, she knew it was her own. Did you notice nobody else paid any attention?"

"I know," answered Ruth. "From the very first days in the hospital, during my internship in the maternity ward, I discovered that when the nurses wheeled the babies down the corridors to their mothers for their morning feeding, the mothers would instantly recognize their own babies cries, although to us the cries all sounded alike."

She paused a moment and then she went on, speaking her thoughts aloud. "I loved the work in the maternity ward. Tiny new babies are so wonderful. They come into the world fighting mad, as if they resented being dumped into the kind of world grown-ups build; and sometimes I used to feel very sorry for them, especially if they were babies born to slum parents where I knew they would rarely ever have enough to eat or clothes to cover them against the cold. I guess maybe that's why I feel so keenly about Lydia Holcombe and her brood."

"They're getting a raw deal," Len admitted. "As soon as the feasting is over, we'll spring our crusade on the folks and see what we can do about conditions in the Flats."

"We just have to do something," Ruth told him fiercely.

Len looked up at her from where he sat on a step below her, and the dim yellow light from inside the bunkhouse illuminated his face so that she could see the tenderness in it.

"Don't you worry, darling. We'll do something," he promised her gently, and seemed not to realize the endearment that had slipped out. "Oh, there's Father Bergstrom now."

In the flaring light that surrounded the long tables, Ruth could see the plump old man making his way through the crowd, pausing here and there to greet someone, to pause, chat and then move on.

Someone gave him a laden plate, and he looked about and saw Ruth and Len on the bunkhouse steps and came over.

"Is this one of those moments where three would be an unbearable crowd?" he asked gently, standing before them, the dim light showing the twinkle in his eyes.

"Of course not, Father Bergstrom," Ruth answered swiftly, and swept aside her skirt to make room for him on the step. "This is a council of war, and it couldn't get started until you got here."

"I was late on purpose," admitted Father Bergstrom. "And anyway, I had to make a call on the way out. Have you spoken to anybody yet, Len?"

"Only to Miss Lily."

Father Bergstrom looked startled.

"Miss Lily?" he repeated. "But she——"

"Is completely in sympathy and I haven't the faintest doubt that right this minute she is dropping choice words in the ears of most of the women and any of the men she can buttonhole."

"No doubt," agreed Father Bergstrom dryly.

"Father Bergstrom, you don't believe Miss Lily is—well, not quite right mentally?" demanded Ruth swiftly.

"My dear child, what I think has little bearing on the situation. It's what other people think," Father Bergstrom pointed out. "But we of course

need every voice we can get if we are going to beat Walt Hubbard down and force him to clean up those Flats. If we could set up a boycott against him, get the swamp people not to bring him their hides and furs and not to buy their supplies from him, I think that would go a long way toward accomplishing our purpose. Just convince him that until he does put the shacks into livable, sanitary condition, the swamp people will withhold their furs and hides, and buy their supplies elsewhere."

"Where?" asked Len sceptically.

"Where?" Father Bergstrom hesitated and then admitted, "Well, yes, I see your point, since Walt has the only general merchandise store in the Harbour; also, he is the only buyer of furs and hides. That does pose quite a problem, doesn't it?"

"Quite a problem," said Len.

"But surely some way could be managed," protested Ruth. "I think a boycott is a very good idea; a sort of passive resistance that avoids violence and yet accomplishes our purpose. And anyway, it will be some time before the swamp people bring their furs and hides in for sale, won't it?"

"A couple of months, maybe," agreed Len. "But Walt can ride out a couple of months as easily as they can. And once we face him with this, he's going to get nasty. If we could only figure out some way to get him to co-operate——"

"Such as what we've tried for the past three years?" suggested Father Bergstrom dryly.

Behind them a woman's voice murmured anxiously, "Excuse me, please?"

Mary Sue, holding the now sleeping baby huddled in a shawl in her arms, brushed past them, and Len stood up and asked quickly, "Mary Sue, you're not leaving now? Why, the party's not half over yet."

"Ben and me, we've got to be up early in the morning, Mr. Len, and it's time the kids was home and in bed. It's been a grand party and fine vittles and we all enjoyed it. Good night, Father; good night, Miss Doc." And Mary Sue scuttled away into the group around the second of the long tables where all the swamp people had gathered.

Ruth, Father Bergstrom and Len watched as she moved through the crowd. They saw plates put down and people turn away, men gathering their families together. Within a few minutes the swamp people were all leaving.

"I'd forgotten Mary Sue was in the bunkhouse," said Len as ancient flivvers and war-beaten jeeps chugged away.

"You mean she overheard and spread the word?" demanded Ruth.

"She knew the swamp people didn't dare get implicated in anything that was aimed against Walt," Len answered. "I knew it, too, and I knew we were going to have to approach the subject very diplomatically. Yet I forgot that she was here or that she could overhear us."

Father Bergstrom put down his barely tasted plate, stood up and said crisply, "We may as well get started with our meeting. Len. At least all of the Harbour people are still here."

Ruth watched and listened as Father Bergstrom

stood on a chair so that he was raised above the crowd, and began his speech outlining their hopes about the Flats. She heard a stirring, a murmuring as of protest, and saw some of the faces turn inimical. Yet she could not be sorry she had started this. It was something that needed desperately to be done! And she thought of Lydia and those frightened, ragged, half-starved children as she felt her determination deepen.

Father Bergstrom finished and said, "Now we'll hear from our beloved Miss Doc."

A man pushed his way to the front of the crowd, and Ruth identified him as Link Collum, who boarded at Maude's and who ran the garage and service station that supplied the Harbour with the essentials for its motorized vehicles.

"I reckon there's no use of us hearing from Miss Doc, Father Bergstrom," said Link, and there was a murmur of agreement from the crowd. "She's a stranger here and I reckon she don't understand that here in the Harbour we live and let live. We don't interfere with folks; we figure this here is a free country and we all of us got enough to do minding our own business without trying to interfere with other folks'."

"Even when conditions are such that they could easily create an epidemic that might affect your lives and the lives of your children?" Ruth demanded sharply.

Link's eyes were cool and the faces back of him illuminated by the flaring lights overhead were inimical and withdrawn.

"We all been living here a mighty long time,

Miss Doc, and there's never been any outbreak of disease from the Flats. Them marshes out there are salt marshes; Dr. Ed always told us disease didn't breed in salt marshes," he reminded her curtly, his eyes coolly taking her measure.

"But there are hungry children there, and women being beaten and abused by their brutal husbands——"

"Reckon the first ones that would object to you interfering, Miss Doc, would be the wives themselves. Folks in these parts don't take kindly to having outsiders messing in their private lives," said Link grimly, and turned to the crowd that was in obvious, murmurous agreement with him. "Guess we'd all best be going. Been a nice party, Len. We sure enjoyed it."

Ruth made a movement of protest, but Len on one side of her, Father Bergstrom on the other, checked her. Ruth looked up at Len in startled disbelief and he said softly, "Let them go, darling. There's nothing you can do—now."

When the last guest had departed, and the young men who worked for Len had said awkward good-nights and gone into the bunkhouse, Father Bergstrom sighed heavily and gave Ruth a smile of singular sweetness, touched with sadness.

"Well, anyway, my dear child, we tried," he told her.

"And I'm not giving up!" blazed Ruth, her voice shaking.

"You'd better see Lydia tomorrow, child, before you go any further. I'm afraid you'll find Lydia is

no longer interested in having her man punished for what he does to her," said Father Bergstrom. "There's an old English law that is frequently quoted to me here, to the effect that a man has a perfect right to beat his wife if he uses a stick no thicker than his little finger."

"Oh, I don't believe it!"

"Neither did I," Father Bergstrom admitted ruefully. "But I find it's true——"

"An old *English* law——"

"Many of these people are descendants of English settlers."

A thin, waspish voice said sternly, "Len, I want to go home."

"Of course, Miss Lily," said Len, and drew Ruth down beside him and the three walked to his waiting car.

"Too bad, Ruth," said Miss Lily, but there was a faint hint of "I told you so!" in her voice.

"I'm not giving up!" said Ruth through her teeth.

Miss Lily frowned at her.

"Oh, now, there's no manner of sense in beating your head against a brick wall, Ruth! There's no disgrace in admitting you're licked. Just look after the patients you've got and leave the Flat to stew in their own filth," she said quickly. "That is, if you have any patients, after tonight."

Startled, Ruth stared at her, and Len looked troubled.

"What do you mean by that?" Ruth demanded.

"Well, it's plain as the nose on your face, I reckon," drawled Miss Lily, with that faint note

of "I told you so" still in her voice. "You noticed the way the swamp squatters left, didn't you? Somebody must have told 'em what you all had in mind; and after Father Bergstrom made his speech, the Harbour people wouldn't even listen to you. So I don't imagine many of 'em will be needing your services for some time to come."

Ruth turned sharply to Len.

"Is that true?" she demanded.

Len hesitated and then he said slowly, "I'm afraid it may be, darling. You see, they are afraid you're going to stir up trouble, and none of them wants to be mixed up in it."

He turned in at Miss Lily's driveway and parked the car.

"I'll be right back as soon as I see Miss Lily safely inside and her lamp lighted," he promised.

Ruth sat sunk in her seat, badly shaken and incredulous. All she had wanted to do was to be of help to these people; and they had turned from her as from an enemy!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN Len came back, he paused beside the car and leaned against the door, looking down on her in the frail light of a late-risen moon.

"Don't cry, darling," he said softly, his voice husky.

Ruth drew a deep, hard breath, her hands tightly clenched.

"D-d-d-don't be absurd," she stammered. "Doctors don't cry."

"Maybe not. But pretty girls with a crusading spirit who have just been kicked in the teeth by an ungrateful populace surely have a right to," said Len, and got into the car and drew her across until she lay in his arms, her face hidden against his shoulder, his arms holding her very closely, his cheek against her hair. "Go ahead and cry, honey. You'll feel better afterwards!"

"It's just that I meant well——" She broke off because of tears and went on huskily. "Did you see their faces, Len? They looked as if they hated me!"

"Oh, no, darling, they don't hate you. They're just a little afraid of you!" Len soothed her. "Afraid that you'll stir up a lot of trouble they feel they can easily get along without! I'm afraid their philosophy of life is to 'let sleeping dogs lie. Don't stir 'em up or they'll start barking'."

"But if people did that, there'd never be any

advances in civilization or medicine or anything," she wailed.

"I know," said Len tenderly. "But don't you worry, honey. We'll straighten things out in spite of them. Only we'll have to go underground with it. And don't ask me how we're going to do that, because I'll only have to say that at the moment I haven't the foggiest idea. But we'll think of something. That's a promise."

Gradually, she became aware that she lay in his arms.

Hot with confusion, she tried to sit up, but Len's arms tightened about her and would not let her go.

"Wait, Precious. Listen to me! You know I love you, don't you?" he pleaded, huskily. "This is the first time you've dropped your guard against me enough for me to try to tell you so and to ask you to marry me. So don't pull away from me. Let me tell you——"

She struggled against him, and instantly he let her go.

"This isn't the time or place."

"No, I suppose not," Len agreed, and set the car violently in motion. "It was only that you seemed so unhappy. I guess I was a fool to think anything I could say could cheer you up."

"It's not that; it's just that—well, neither of us is quite in our right mind." She stumbled and her voice was silent.

"I am," he stated flatly. "I have been from the first. But I guess I was taking an unfair advantage of you, sneaking up on you when your guard was lowered."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? That I said I loved you and wanted to marry you?" His tone was biting. "Well, you needn't be. I'll be around if you change your mind. But don't worry; I won't harass or bother you. I'll just be available for any service at any time."

Humbly, she said, "Thanks. That's nice to know."

When he left her at Maude's gate, he waved and said, "Be seeing you," and drove away in the darkness.

She reached her room with a feeling she was achieving a safe shelter after a heavy storm. She dropped into a chair and put her face in her hands. That evening had been one she would not soon forget. These people she had thought her friends had rounded on her like enemies; and all because she had wanted to do something for the people who lived in the Flats.

But under and around and over her feeling of bitter disappointment and hurt at their behaviour there was a small, glowing thrill at the memory of Len's arms about her, Len's cheek against her hair, Len's voice tender and soothing in her ears.

Deliberately, she tried to think of David; but his image was so faint that she was startled to realize she couldn't even remember the colour of his eyes! Instead, her heart beat with a painful intensity at the memory of Len's arms, and his voice and his tenderness.

"I can't possibly be in love with the man." She spoke her thoughts in a soft whisper into the darkness and the silence of her room. "It just isn't

possible! I've only been here a few weeks. I scarcely even know him!"

But the glow of the memories would not fade, and at last she crept into bed to lie wide-eyed, staring into the darkness until the first rooster crowed, far out in the edge of the swamp somewhere, and another answered him, and a dog barked in that last darkness before the breaking of dawn. . . .

Since she had fallen into an exhausted sleep so late, it was after eight o'clock when she awoke. Her office hours began at nine, and she scrambled through her shower and into an immaculate uniform and hurried down the stairs.

Her reception room was empty, although at this hour there were usually two or three patients waiting.

Maude came along the hall, bearing a tray on which there was a pot of coffee, a plate of toast and some jam.

"We all got to bed so late, and you was even later, so I didn't disturb you for breakfast," said Maude formally. "But I thought you would like some coffee, anyway. Come in the dining-room and I'll fix you a regular breakfast."

"Thanks, but this will be fine." Ruth smiled at her and cleared a space on her desk for the tray. "It's a good thing there were no patients here ahead of me. I'd hate for them to think I was such a sleepy-head."

Maude hesitated at the door, and then she turned and came back and stood looking down at Ruth, her eyes troubled but not hostile.

"I don't imagine you're going to be exactly over-run with patients, Ruth, now or later. Folks have the idea that you're a trouble-maker, and they don't hold with trouble-makers in these parts."

Ruth put down her coffee cup and stared at Maude.

"A trouble-maker? Just because I want the Flats cleaned up and the women and children there protected?" she protested.

"Settin' the Harbour people against the Flats people could stir up a mighty heap of trouble, Ruth!" said Maude gravely. "You're a stranger here. You don't understand."

"You saw Lydia yesterday; you brought the children here for a decent meal; surely you don't condone such things, Maude!"

"I mind my own business and let other folks do the same."

"But the health and welfare of all the people is a doctor's business."

"Dr. Ed never thought so."

Ruth stared at her.

"You mean he never tried to stop——" she began.

"He went when he was called and where he was called but he never tried to interfere with people's business," Maude cut in grimly. "Sure, sometimes when he'd find a man had beat up his wife, he'd purely rear back and get the man told, and for a while, the man would behave himself. But Dr. Ed never threatened to bring in the police or raise any ruckus like that."

Ruth sat very still, meeting Maude's hostile eyes.

"Dr. Ed realized folks was different. There was decent folks and there was brutes. But I reckon he sort of figgered his job was to look after the sick and the ailing and do what he could to patch 'em up. Reckon he just figgered that humankind wasn't none too saintly and he just done the best he could for 'em. He *knowed* the Harbour, Ruth. He respected people's rights to live their own lives. And if you're aiming to stay here, Ruth, I reckon maybe you'd better learn to do the same."

And without giving Ruth a chance to answer, she turned and walked heavily out and Ruth heard her footsteps going down the hall and the slam of the swinging door into the kitchen as it closed violently behind her.

Ruth sat alone in her office until her office hours were finished, but not a patient arrived. There were some calls to make, and she went out to the jeep that had once belonged to Dr. Ed and which was now assigned to her as the Harbour's doctor.

She made her rounds and in one or two places she was allowed to treat seriously ill patients, but in such an atmosphere of hostility that she had trouble keeping down her anger.

Back at the Harbour, she left the jeep in front of Maude's place and walked over to the Holcombe shack. But as she started up the rickety steps, Lydia appeared in the doorway, her bruised face white and set, her eyes cold.

"We aren't needing you, Miss Doc. We're all just fine," she said icily.

"You, too, Lydia?" said Ruth dryly.

Lydia's eyes flickered away from Ruth's and she tilted her head a little.

"I'm obliged to you, Miss Doc, for feeding the children and looking after me," she said distantly. "But we're not needing anything Mr. Hubbard won't do for us."

Ruth nodded, her mouth a thin, bitter line.

"That's fine, Lydia. I'm glad to hear it. But if you need me——"

"We won't, Miss Doc, thanking you kindly," said Lydia, and went in and closed the door.

As Ruth went back across the road in front of Walt Hubbard's place, she heard a burst of raucous laughter and a voice she identified as Walt's saying obviously for her ears, "Reckon she's going to find who's being boycotted here is her, not me!"

Her ears burned as laughter rocketed and there were murmurs of men's voices. Back in her office, she put down her bag and dropped into a chair.

She was done and finished here. She might as well give up and take the next mail boat out. These people would have none of her, and there was nothing to be gained by beating her head against the brick wall of their hostility. And yet—her mouth thinned and her eyes hardened. She wouldn't be a quitter! She'd stay and she'd fight!

Len found her in her office when he came in late that afternoon for dinner, and as he paused in the doorway, she looked up at him, her smile thin-lipped and bitter.

"You'd better not be seen speaking to me unless you want to be sent to Coventry, too!" she warned him.

"A boycott, eh?" said Len, and came in and perched on the corner of her desk.

"You expected it?" she asked sharply.

"I was afraid of it," he corrected her. "I suppose now you'll be leaving us."

"I will not! I refuse to quit under fire!" she snapped. And then she gave voice to a thought she'd been battling all afternoon. "Unless you think I should, so that a new doctor the people will accept and trust can be sent in."

Len shook his head.

"If anybody needs a doctor that badly, they'll send for you," he assured her. "And besides, where do you think we'd get a doctor so easily? The Harbour was without a doctor for six months following Dr. Ed's death."

"Len, how did he manage to close his eyes to Walt Hubbard and all the ugliness? Surely any doctor must have been concerned!"

"Oh, sure he was concerned. But he'd lived here a year, getting over a long illness, before he decided to return to practise. By that time he was accustomed to the people and he knew just about what to expect of them; how far he could go with his reforms and where he had to leave off. I think where we made our mistake—and it was *ours*, not *yours*—was in not properly estimating Walt's stranglehold on the squatters and the people in his shacks. In short, we drew too long a bow!"

"But the whole place seems to feel we've

Offered them a deadly insult," Ruth cried shakily.

"Not the whole place, honey," said Len gently.

"The boys at the camp—and Miss Lily—are with you to a man—and a lady!"

There were tears in Ruth's eyes, though she tried to smile.

"That's nice to know," she admitted.

Len grinned at her warmly.

"Of course, they are all bursting with health, even Miss Lily, so I'm afraid they won't be calling on you for professional services very often," he admitted. "Unless, of course, there is an accident."

Very solemnly he knocked wood at the thought.

Ruth smiled at him tremulously, grateful for his kindness which, she admitted in her heart, was a darned sight more than just kindness. But hastily she reminded herself that this was no time for such thoughts.

The clamour of the bell, announcing supper, rang through the house, and Len stood up, raising his eyebrows in question.

"Supper?" he suggested tentatively.

Ruth shook her head.

"I don't seem to be very hungry," she confessed.

Len nodded gravely.

"In a place more—shall we say civilized—I could ask you to ride out with me somewhere to a nice little restaurant where there would be soft lights and sweet music. But the only eatin' place in the Harbour, aside from Maudie's place here, is open only during the shrimping season. And we have a week or two to go before that starts. Be-

sides, I'm afraid after Maudie's cooking, you wouldn't care for it."

"You go ahead and have your supper," said Ruth. "I'll have something later."

"Promise?"

She smiled. "I promise."

"I hate to admit it, but I'm hungry! Sure you wouldn't like me to sit here and hold your hand? Or let me lend you a strong shoulder to weep on?" he suggested. "I'd be happy to oblige—only happy is not quite as strong a word as I'd like to use."

"Thanks. You're sweet!" said Ruth impulsively, and saw that : that leaped into his eyes and went on "I'll be all right, truly. And doctors don't weep, even on such nice broad shoulders."

The look in his eyes brought a swift tide of colour to her face, and with it once more the disturbing memories of last night.

"Don't they?" he asked softly, and before she could answer, he was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SHE didn't know how long she had been sitting there, listening, almost without being conscious that she was listening, to the supper-time sounds, when suddenly a man appeared in the doorway. A tall, thin man whose garb of rough trousers and ragged shirt marked him as belonging to the squatters.

"Miss Doc," he was excited and agitated, "Father Bergstrom, he's been hurt bad. He's needin' you——"

Before he had finished Ruth was on her feet, reaching for her bag, moving swiftly toward the door so that the man had to move quickly out of her way and to follow her down the steps and along the walk toward a waiting jeep.

"We'd best go in my buggy, Miss Doc," said the man hurriedly. "Me drivin' it'll be easier to find him again."

"Where is he?" asked Ruth swiftly. "He's not at the rectory?"

"No, ma'am. I found him way out in the swamp. Reckon he'd have died right soon if I hadn't come along to check my traps," said the man, and the jeep leaped away from the gate like a sharply spurred horse.

"What happened?" asked Ruth, as the jeep swung out the road Father Bergstrom had driven her on her first sight-seeing trip.

"I don't rightly know, Miss Doc," answered the man. "I jest found him lyin' there groanin'. Out of his head, too. Might be snake bite. Snakes is mighty bad out here. Coulda been a lot o' things. Onliest thing I knowed was to get you quick as I could. I didn't try to lift him or move him. Way he was layin', might be he'd hurt his back—maybe in falling."

Ruth drew a deep breath and her hands clenched tightly in her lap.

"You don't think he'd been attacked?" she breathed.

"Well, 'course they's a mighty lot o' right dangerous animals in the swamp," he admitted.

"I meant by somebody, not an animal."

The man, negotiating an almost invisible trail which nothing less than a jeep could have managed, shot her a swift glance.

"Now, who'd want to hurt a good ole man like Bergstrom?" he wanted to know, and there was anger in his voice. "Way he works, lookin' after folks—why, they ain't nobody for miles around that would *dast* lay a finger on him."

"Even after last night?" asked Ruth evenly.

In the dying light of dusk, the man's bearded jaw shut hard.

"Ain't nobody blamin' the old man with what happened last night, Miss Doc," he said grimly. "It's you folks are mad at."

"I'm glad to know that. I'd hate for them to hold Father Bergstrom responsible."

"It was you that was so all-fired busy threatenin' to bring the law in. Folks 'round here don't like

no such talk as that, Miss Doc." There was something suddenly frightening in the man's manner as he spoke.

Beside her, in the growing darkness that was what the swamp people called second dusk, the man's face was hard and cold; brutal, even. She tried to still her uneasiness by reminding herself that she was a doctor and that she must accustom herself to such people as these.

But as the trail wound on and on, so that only the man himself could have followed it, her creeping uneasiness sent a chill through her.

"How much farther?" she asked, and to her dismay heard the faint tremor in her own voice.

The man swung her a narrow-eyed, frankly malevolent glance and grinned unpleasantly.

"Oh, it ain't fur now," he answered, his tone mocking, derisive.

They had been travelling for some time and she knew that the Harbour lay far behind them. But their route had been a circuitous one and she could only hope that they had circled enough so that the Harbour was not really as far away as it seemed to her now in her moment of swiftly mounting panic.

All around them the dense undergrowth towered up and up until it was swallowed by the enormous cypress trees. Darkness here was almost complete; she could see only dimly on either side of her when at last the jeep floundered to a stop.

"We got to take the boat from here," said the man beside her.

Startled, unmoving, she stared at him through the darkness.

"A boat?" she stammered.

"Sure. The old guy's on one of the trappers' platforms down in the swamp," said the man.

"But what was Father Bergstrom doing in a place like this?" she asked. "Surely no one lives here."

"Oh, trappers and hunters. They got to get way inside the swamp to lay their traps. You know how the old guy is; anywhere there's people, you'll find him," the man said casually, and swung himself out of the jeep and into two feet of brackish swamp water. "Come on. We got to hurry."

Afterwards—long, long afterwards when she was capable of thought—Ruth realized that she should have become suspicious of the man long before they had reached this place. But with the thought of poor old Father Bergstrom lying helpless somewhere in this dense jungle, she could only accept her responsibility as a doctor and make every possible effort to reach him and render what assistance she could.

When she stepped out of the jeep, she gasped as the cold water rose almost to her knees, but she floundered after the man to where he held one of the small, narrow boats she had come to know were used for swamp transportation in places where the water was too shallow to accept one of the *bateaux* or *pirogues*.

The man steadied the boat while she stumbled into it, holding her breath as it rocked and

swayed beneath her weight. The man, standing in the boat, dug a long pole into the water and propelled the boat forward through what looked in the dim light like a sea of tall, waving grass. There was obviously a narrow channel, for the boat moved with surprising speed until the man brought it to a halt at one of the platforms Ruth had learned the trappers set up along lanes where their traps were laid.

The platform consisted merely of some rough boards laid across the giant mango-roots that protruded upward out of the water, laced and twisted together like a nest of coiling snakes.

The man made no effort to help her as she clambered to the platform and looked about her in the dim, fast-dying light.

"Where——" she began, turning swiftly to the man, staggering a little with the swiftness of her movement, thinking he was behind her.

Instead the man still stood in his boat, and as she turned, he thrust the pole deep into the water and the boat slid rapidly away, leaving her marooned.

For an instant, too dazed to realize that he was leaving her here, she could make no sound. Then, as the boat slid away, she screamed wildly, again and again; and the only answering sound was the man's evil laugh floating back to her.

For a long moment she was too stunned, too incredulous to realize fully the enormity of the thing that had happened to her. And then with her mounting panic came the conviction that this was somehow Walt Hubbard's work, that he had

planned the whole trap and that she, like a fool, had walked blindly into it.

Oh, they had planned it carefully and baited it well. Any doctor, she told herself frantically, would have answered just such a call as this.

The darkness now was so thick that she could see only the glimmer of the sky through the thick-laced tree branches above her. She had climbed out of the boat with her instrument case in her hand; that small black bag that is so much of a doctor's equipment that he is unconscious of it unless he fails to have it. Inside it there was, of course, a powerful flashlight. Sobbing a little with relief as she recalled that, she opened the case and with a shaking hand brought out the flashlight and turned its comforting beam on the scene about her.

The platform on which she stood was only a few feet long and half as wide. It rose above the black water only a foot or two. Around her, over her, ahead of her there was only the dense jungle. And all about her, like a savage cloud, were mosquitoes!

Mosquitoes! Savage, vicious, so deadly that she knew the hunters, trappers and fishermen would not willingly spend one hour after dark in the swamp! Faintly memory came back to her. She couldn't remember who had said it; but she could hear a voice saying, "Ain't nothin' human could live in the swamp more'n a few hours, come night. Mosquitoes would eat him alive."

Although she knew how hopeless it was, she could not keep back the wild screams that bub-

bled from her throat as she felt the first swarm of mosquitoes swooping down upon her; covering her exposed face, her hands, her ankles through their sheer nylons; biting through the thin, crisp material of her uniform.

How long she endured the panic and the pain of that savage attack she did not know, because at last a merciful unconsciousness swirled over her in a black tide.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SUPPER was over and some of the logging-camp men were lounging in the living-room listening desultorily to the radio when the child Beatsie stumbled into the room, wild-eyed, her small grubby face white with terror.

"Mr. Len. I got to see Mr. Len. I gotta—I gotta——" She was sobbing.

Lafe picked her up, but she fought him furiously.

"Hi, what's up, kid?" asked Lafe as he set her back on her feet.

"Mr. Len—where's Mr. Len? Where's Mr. Len?" wailed the child.

Somebody called Len's name, although the child's wail must have reached to the farthest corner of the big old house, and a moment later he was there, crouched down beside the child, his hands on her shoulders, soothing her as he would have soothed a small, terrified animal.

"It's Len, Beatrice. What is it? Your mother——" Len began.

Beatsie clung to him frantically.

"No, sir, Mr. Len. It's Miss Doc——" The child caught her breath on a hiccough and stammered on, "They took her out in the swamp and *left her!*"

A shudder went through the child, and the roomful of men stood stunned and incredulous before the shocking words.

Len shook the child savagely.

"Beatrice, don't you lie to me!" His voice was a rumbling note of fury. .

"I wouldn't, Mr. Len—I wouldn't ever! Miss Doc's good and kind. She fed us kids and took care of Mom—and now they want her to die out there—the snakes and the mosquitoes. Oh, Mr. Len, go find her, go find her!" wailed Beatsie.

"We'll find her, Beatrice. Where did your father take her?" Len silenced the angry movement of the listening men, his face white and set behind its bronze sun-tan.

"Oh, it wasn't Pop. He wouldn't dast! It was a man, Mr. Walt knew. I ain't never seen him before; but Mr. Walt called him Fraley and told him he'd give him a hundred dollars if he'd take—he called Miss Doc a dirty name—out and lose her. And the man said it would be the easiest hundred bucks he ever made. I was in the store. They didn't know it. They was all together down at one end; and when I heard 'em say Miss Doc and then that dirty name I hid under the counter." The child's story came out in a wild, gusty babble. "I tried to get over here and warn Miss Doc, but Mom kept me busy. I dunno if she knew anything about it—I don't reckon she did. I reckon maybe she just needed me to help with the kids and gettin' supper for Pop." The child's voice was swallowed by sobs.

Len stood up, his face graven of stone, and without a word to the others stalked out. The men followed him, as stern of face and as silent as he.

They stalked across the road to Hubbard's place, and as they went up the steps, there was the sound of a rock 'n roll record on the juke box and men's loud, raucous laughter. But as Len strode through the door, the logging-camp men behind him, the laughter died as though a collective hand had been clapped over every mouth in the place.

Walt hesitated and then he came forward, genial, beaming, though his eyes were wary.

"Well, well, Hudson. Come in, boys, come in. What can I do for you?" he asked pleasantly.

The logging crew made a concerted movement toward him, but Len flung out an arm and stopped them.

"Where is she, Hubbard?" Len demanded, and his voice was low, ominous, heavy with threat.

Walt was elaborately surprised, though there was fear in his eyes, and the others behind him stirred uneasily.

"Why, Hudson, who do you mean? Don't tell me a gal is missing and you and your fellows don't know," Walt began, but Len had him by the shirt-front, yanking him up close, his other fist doubled menacingly.

"Where's Miss Doc? And talk fast, Hubbard, or I'll turn my boys loose on you and your friends and there won't be enough of any of you left to make a decent burial. *Where is she?*"

Hubbard clawed at the hand that held him, his eyes filled now with panic.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he stammered, but Len's clenched fist plunged

against the point of his jaw, rocking him backward.

"Tell me, or I'll beat you to a pulp." Len's voice shook with the load of fury and outrage that it held.

"Now, how would *I* know?" Hubbard asked.

Over his shoulder, Len spoke to Lafe.

"Find Fraley," he demanded.

"He's not here, Len. I know all these fellows. None of them is named Fraley," said Lafe.

"He collected his hundred bucks and beat it," said some man in the back of the group behind Hubbard, and Hubbard spat a savage oath over his shoulder.

"So! You did hire somebody to take her out into the swamp!" Len struck Hubbard again, a by no means gentle blow. "Come on, Hubbard, where did he take her? Or so help me, I'll kill you with my bare hands—and as slowly and painfully as I can! Tell me!"

"I don't know, Hudson—I swear I don't. He said he knew the swamp. He's a trapper; I don't know where he lives. I wouldn't know where he took her—honest, I don't!" Hubbard whined, his knees buckling.

"We'll find her, if we have to take the swamp apart tree by tree and bayou by bayou!" said Len savagely, and flung Hubbard from him. "And then we'll come back and attend to you and your friends."

"Let's tend to them now; then our minds will be free——" protested one of Len's men.

"We'll find Miss Doc first!" said Len harshly.

"These scum will be here when we get back. They'd better be!"

The men plunged out into the darkness, and with his heart crying out within him, sick with the knowledge of the ordeal Ruth was enduring, praying that she might be still alive when they found her, Len organized the hunt and the men went plunging off.

As Len swung into his jeep, the child Beatsie scrambled in beside him.

"Lemme go with you, Mr. Len. Pop'll beat me to death when he knows I told on Mr. Walt. And anyway—I got a right to go with you!" she pleaded.

"Hang on, then," said Len grimly, and the jeep leaped into action. . . .

Hank Rayson was a trapper who came to the Harbour twice a year. No one knew quite where he lived. He seldom spoke half a dozen words when he was in town. He brought his load of pelts, dumped them in front of Walt, and went about the shelves, accumulating the staples that he would need for another six months in the wilderness. With a crocus sack loaded with these supplies slung over his shoulder, he trudged out of the Harbour, a dour, bearded, hard-eyed old man whose voice seemed rusty with disuse.

When Walt paid him for the load of pelts he had brought in, Hank merely leaned on the counter, watching him. In the beginning, Walt had tried to cheat him, since it was not in Walt's nature ever to pay anybody a fair price for any-

thing, Hank had merely tapped the thin sheaf of old bills that Walt had laid down and had looked deep into Walt's eyes. And, sweating somewhat at what he had seen or guessed in the man's eyes, Walt had put down the balance of the money. Hank had merely grinned a faint, very unpleasant grin, scooped up the money, slung his bag of supplies over his shoulder and stalked out. But after that Walt had always been completely honest with the man.

Knowing the ways of the swamp as he did, having a healthy respect for the murderous mosquitoes, Hank had always seen to it that he got back to his own place well before dark. But tonight, he had had some trouble with his trap-line and he was late. Darkness descended on him before he could get home, and he planned to pull up beside one of the trappers' platforms along the narrow channel, build his usual protection against the mosquitoes and make out the best he could until it was light enough for him to follow the right channel to his hidden dwelling place. The protection was simple—to a swamper. The bark of certain shrubs growing close to the water could be stripped, a tiny fire made inside the small can without which no trapper ever took to the streams to bait, or unload his traps. The bark would give off a thick, pungent smoke that would coat the exposed flesh with a repellent against which not even these vicious mosquitoes would attack.

By the time he reached the platform they were already singing their rasping, ugly song about him, but he had donned his net of mosquito-

netting as soon as he realized that he would not get home before dark. His hands were bare, but his shirt-sleeves were buttoned close to the wrist and his ancient leather jacket and his thick dungarees offered some protection.

He came to the platform by instinct rather than sight. He tied his boat securely, stepped up on the platform—and swore violently and aloud. A small white huddle lay before him. He had almost stepped on it. And beside it, the light still on, lay a small but powerful torch.

Hank picked up the torch curiously, and then turned its light on the glimmer of white—and swore again and stepped back so sharply that he almost fell off of the platform.

A woman! A city woman such as he had not seen in more years than he could remember! And already in a bad way from the attack of the mosquitoes.

He knelt beside her, the vicious swarm singing hungrily about him, and discovered that she was alive, but only barely so. There was no time to be lost. He had to take her back to the Harbour and be fast about it, or it would be too late.

Shrinking against the touch of her, as though it had been some repulsive object that he touched, he picked her up as effortlessly as though she had been a child, and laid her with clumsy gentleness in his boat and started back to the landing at the Harbour road.

The thought of carrying her from the landing in to the Harbour did not distress him except that the feminine touch of her slight, warm body was

very distasteful to him. His bearded, grim face was set and taut when he brought the boat to the landing, tied it up, lifted the unconscious girl and slung her over his shoulder as one carries a heavy sack. As in fact he had for years carried the crocus-sack filled with the meagre necessities of his barren life.

He set out along the road at a brisk pace, and suddenly around a curve walked full into the headlights of a jeep that slammed to a stop, and from which men tumbled out and raced toward him.

"It's Miss Doc," somebody called out to the second jeep that had just arrived behind the first.

Len reached the bewildered Hank first and caught Ruth into his arms, as Hank turned to plod away.

"Hi, you, wait a minute," Lafe called, and plunged forward to grab Hank by the arm.

"Let go of me, you——" And Hank's word was an ugly epithet that sounded even uglier in his rusty, seldom-used voice. "I found her where she had no right to be. She's in a bad way. Best get her to a doctor fast as you can!"

"Rayson—where was she?" demanded Len, having assured himself that Ruth was still alive.

"That's my business. Yours is to get her to a doctor soon as you can!" snarled Hank, and shook Lafe off and stalked away the way he had come.

Lafe took a step after him, but Len called him sharply.

"Let him alone, Lafe. He's right. Come on. We've got to get her out to the camp and let

Bart get busy doing what he can for her."

Lafe leaped into the driver's seat and stared at Len.

"The camp?" he repeated, startled.

"After the way the town has treated her, you think I'd take her back there? Besides, she needs first aid and anything else Bart can do for her. Now, *get going!*"

Len's voice was harsh and shaking as he cradled Ruth's limp body as carefully as he could, with an infinite tenderness that made Lafe's eyes smart.

"Better signal the others she's been found," he remembered as the jeep sprang forward.

Lafe lifted the revolver that lay on the seat beside him and fired four shots into the air. And then he settled down to getting the jeep over the road as fast as it could travel.

As they entered the compound at the camp, people were milling excitedly about and a stout, bespectacled young man hurried forward as he saw the limp burden in Len's arms.

"Is she alive, Len?" he asked anxiously.

"Just barely." Len bit the words off between his teeth. "Get some of the women to get her to bed and see what you can do for her. And *fast!*"

"Sure, Len," said Bart eagerly, and ran ahead to the small, neat building that housed the clinic and had a bed turned back and ready by the time Len reached the hospital ward, with its four beds, its immaculate cleanliness seeming to shine in the brilliant flood of light that spilled down from the white-washed ceiling.

Len laid Ruth down with a gentleness that had a touch of despair in it.

Bart's wife, a plump, cheerful-looking woman whose face now was grave with compassion, said quickly, "You men-folks get out so's we can get her to bed."

For just a moment Len stood looking down at the limp, bedraggled body in its soiled and stained uniform; the swollen, blood-pocked face and the hands that, he knew, had been geared to the protection of the sick and suffering. And then he turned and almost plunged out of the small hospital room.

He dropped down on the steps and put his face in his hands, sick and shaking now from the reaction; and with a growing rage that crept over him, steeling him to a moment of madness.

A small, scared voice whispered, "Is she goin' t' live, Mr. Len?"

Len looked up and into the grimy, tear-stained face of Beatsie, and suddenly he put his arm about the small, quivering body and drew it close.

"If she does, Beatrice, it will be because you saved her." His voice was thick. "If you hadn't come to me when you did—if we hadn't met Hank Rayson and got her here when we did—I'll get somebody to take you home, Beatrice."

The child shivered in terror.

"Oh, no, please, Mr. Len. Pop will near 'bout beat me to death!" she whimpered.

Len stood up, his face set and grim.

"Those days are over, Beatrice. He'll never lay a finger on you again; or your mother or the other

children," he stated in a voice that made it a vow.

Beatsie thought of that for a moment, and then she heaved a deep sigh.

"I reckon that would be one of them miracles Father Bergstrom tells us about," she murmured wistfully, with not the faintest trace of hope that such a miracle could actually be brought about.

A car ricketed at high speed into the compound, and Maude Elliott tumbled out and came running to Len.

"Is it so, Len? Did you find her? Is she alive?" she panted.

Len eyed her stonily.

"All of a sudden you're terribly concerned about her, you and the Harbour people. You could have prevented this, you know, if you hadn't been so afraid of Walt Hubbard."

"That's not so! Nobody is afraid of Walt Hubbard."

"No? You certainly gave a fine example of not being afraid!"

"Look here, Len, you've got to get to town quick. Those boys of yours are about to wreck the place!" panted Maude.

"Oh, I see. You're not concerned for Ruth; you're just afraid some of your precious property might be destroyed."

"Len, they were dragging Walt out of the store and fixing to set fire to the place!"

"Well, hooray for them! That's one way of getting a pesthole cleaned up!"

Maude laid her hands on his arm and tried

to shake him. But he only stood looking down at her, his face stern, his hands in his pockets.

"But, Len, you know what a dangerous thing this could be. We've never had any violence in the Harbour. You know how it could spread. You've got to stop them, Len, you've got to. They may kill Walt!"

"That," stated Len savagely, "will save me the trouble."

Maude fell back a step, her face white, her hand going up to her lips, her eyes wide.

"Len!" she gasped in horror. "You don't mean that!"

"I never meant anything so much in my life," Len assured her. "And if any of the Harbour people try to stop them——"

"But, Len, the Harbour people are *helping* them!" gasped Maude. "That's why it's so dangerous. The whole town is up in arms against Walt and the people in the Flats. Sure, the men in the Flats are as bad as Walt—but, Len, there are women and children in the Flats."

Len was shaken for a moment. "My men won't touch the women and children," he stated flatly.

"Maybe not. But some of the Harbour people are pretty mad; they won't stop just with burning the store. They'll burn the Flats, too. And those poor devils who live there will lose all their bits-and-pieces of furniture. Somebody might get killed—a child, Len! Oh, Len, you've just *got* to come and stop them. Nobody else can! Folks say Miss Doc is dead. *Is* she, Len?"

In the yellow light that spilled through the

windows of the hospital building, Len's face was grey and stone-like.

"Not yet! Bart's doing what he can for her."

The door behind him opened, and Sue, Bart's wife, looked out.

"Bart says tell you that she's in a bad way but he thinks she's got a fifty-fifty chance. He's doing all he can for her. But he is kind of scared. He's never had a case like this before. She's still unconscious, and he says she's suffering from shock and exposure and being just about scared out of her wits. But the mosquito poison is the worst," she reported breathlessly. "Oh, hello, Miz' Elliott."

"Will you let me stay and help nurse her, Sue?" pleaded Maude.

"No!" said Len violently. "We'll take care of her. You'd better get back to your precious friends at the Harbour, that were too good to help her when she needed your backing and your support."

"That's hard talk to an old friend, Len," said Maude huskily.

"When you stopped being *her* friend, you stopped being *my* friend," said Len harshly. "You'd better get going."

Maude stared at him unbelievably for a long moment, and then she turned and stumbled to her car and drove away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As the sound of the car died away, Len looked down at the child who huddled beside him and then at the group of men and women who stood anxiously about the steps. The wives of his married employees, who lived in neat small bungalows about the compound.

"Here," he stated, laying his hand on Beatsie's tumbled, disordered hair, "is the one who saved Miss Doc's life, and literally at the risk of her own. She needs a bath and clean clothes and I'm pretty sure she needs food, too. Who will look after her?"

The women surged forward and one of them said firmly, "She's just about the size of my Martie and can wear Martie's clothes. You come along with me, honey! What's your name?"

And Beatsie, looking up at Len with worshipful eyes, said clearly, "My name is Beatrice!"

Len touched her cheek caressingly.

"And anyone who ever calls her Beatsie from now on will have to answer to me," he assured them, and the child's face beamed with joy as she slipped her grubby little paw into the kindly one extended to her and walked away.

One of the men came up to Len and said uneasily, "There's a powerful big fire down the road a piece, Len. There's only six of us here at the camp, but don't you think maybe we'd better

try to find out where it is and do something about it?"

Len met his eyes squarely.

"I *know* where it is," he said softly. "And I feel sure it's no danger to the forest. I think *you* know where it is, too."

The man grinned. "Sure. And we married fellows don't feel very happy at missing all the fun!"

Len hesitated, and then he said grimly, "Perhaps we'd better have a look at what's going on in the Harbour, don't you think?"

"Yes, *sir*, I sure do!" agreed the man happily, and in a few minutes they were all headed that way, the women watching after them anxiously but offering neither protest nor question. One of their unwritten laws, far more observed than many on legal statute books, was not to question their men in moments of crisis, as this obviously was.

Len, leading the parade of three jeeps, saw the ruddy flames that towered above the Trading Post well before he reached the Harbour. His jaw hardened and there was a gleam in his eyes as he rounded the last curve in the road and saw the Harbour before him.

Despite the fact that it was well after midnight, every detail of the Harbour was revealed as though it had been broad daylight; for Walt's beloved store was flaming, the illumination reaching to the farthest corner. Beyond, the Flats showed up, with small huddles of shabby, worn-out furnishings tossed out, and a group of terrified women

and children stood back from the flames, watching the destruction with panic-stricken eyes, yet not quite daring to cross the road to where the Harbour people milled and struggled about a huge live-oak tree.

Len leaped out of the jeep and ran forward. In the middle of the group. Walt Hubbard was on his knees, a stout rope about his neck, one end of the rope flung over the giant limb of the huge tree. Walt was babbling in terror, sweat and tears running down his fat, pasty-white face.

Len sickened at the sight of him as he strode forward, pushing people out of his way.

"Here, stop that," he ordered sharply.

The man who was tossing the rope over the tree limb turned, wide-eyed.

"Lynching," Len told him grimly, "is against the law."

"I suppose kidnapping and murdering an innocent and fine woman like Miss Doc, isn't," protested the man.

Len took the rope out of his hand and faced the group.

"Lynching is too good for him," he said savagely. "But there's no point in punishing ourselves just to get even with him. It will hurt him a lot more to have him arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to a long term in prison. I'd say he'd get at least twenty years."

"Don't they hang people for kidnapping, Len?" asked an interested voice, and Walt moaned.

"I didn't do it, Len—I swear I didn't! You can ask any of the fellows that was in the store. It

was Fraley that did it—I swear it!” he babbled.

“All right, where *is* Fraley?” demanded Len.

“I don’t know, Len—I swear I don’t know,” Walt babbled. “He came back, I gave him his money, and he went off in his boat.”

“*You paid him!*” Len kicked the man hard and was instantly ashamed of the brutality. “Get up and on your feet, you filth!”

“Now, looky here, Len,” protested a voice from the crowd, and Len turned sharply.

“All right, who wants to argue?” he snapped.

“I just want to say that it ain’t fitten for this man to be allowed to live. How come we can’t just string him up, like we was aiming to do?” demanded the voice.

“Because I like the idea of his doing ten to twenty years of hard labour, instead of dying swiftly and easily, don’t you?” asked Len silkily.

There was a moment of silence and then a little burst of laughter and a general agreement.

“Reckon with all the evidence we got against him, ain’t much chance of him gettin’ off scot-free, come to think of it,” somebody agreed happily.

“’Less he escapes——” began someone.

Len turned a look that was mocking, bitter and corrosive on the shivering Walt.

“Oh, I don’t think he’d try that!” he drawled, and his tone was like a whip-lash. “Where would he go? The swampers wouldn’t let him light. And he hasn’t got a boat that would make the mainland.”

“He shore ain’t!” somebody chuckled. “First

thing I done was to bust his motor and stove in his boat! Reckon he ain't goin' nowhere in that boat!"

"How 'bout lettin' me lock him up in my garage, Len?" suggested the garage operator happily. "I'll stand guard over him. Not to keep him from escapin'. To keep anybody from gettin' at him! I'm plum pleased to think o' him bustin' rocks for ten or twenty years. Sweat some of that lard offen him, maybe."

"Fine," said Len, and then, "Where's his gang?"

"Oh, we got 'em right over here," said somebody, and thrust forward a hang-dog group of men who were the fathers and husbands of the inhabitants of the Flats.

"You fellows are so fond of Walt, we couldn't bear to separate you from him now," Len told them. "You should rate at least a couple of years apiece for helping him."

"But we didn't, Len, honest," whined a man.

"Oh, it's you, Holcombe! I've got a few more charges to place against you, such as wife-beating and mistreatment of your children."

"But Len——" whined Bud.

"Mr. Hudson to you!"

"O.K., Mr. Hudson—what'll my wife and young 'uns do if I get sent away?"

"They'll do so well that they'll marvel how they ever put up with you!" snapped Len. "And that goes for the rest of you. Your wives and children will be cared for a thousand times better than you've ever done for them. You can be sure of that!"

Len thrust his way through the crowd, and as he approached his jeep, the Harbour people crowded about him.

"Len, how is Miss Doc?" they asked.

Len turned and looked them over slowly, a look in his eyes that even the dying flames of the store revealed to them so clearly that involuntarily they stepped backward.

"I suppose you all realize that you, the self-appointed better element of the Harbour, are morally as much to blame for what happened to her as Walt and his filthy brutes!" He flung the words at them like a blow.

"Oh, now, Len——" it was Maude Elliott's anxious voice, conciliatory, pleading.

"I'd rather not discuss it," said Len savagely. "There's just one thing you may all be mighty sure of! She'll never set foot in this place again, except to get on the mail boat to leave here for good! You may as well start right now trying to find yourself a new doctor; and may the good Lord have mercy on anybody you get. For it's a dead sure thing you never will!"

They cried out in protest as he thrust his way through the group, got into the jeep and drove away.

Behind him, in the dying flames of the store, their faces were set and grave.

Maude stood looking after him for a moment, and then she dashed her hand across her eyes and said to her neighbour, "I feel like the lowest down varmint that ever lived."

"No, that's me," said her neighbour. "When I

think of how she took care of my boy, Barney, time he stuck a rusty nail in his foot, and sat up with him for two nights to keep him from having lockjaw, and then I turned against her—I could just purely die!”

“She was a mighty fine woman,” a man said heavily, and Maude rounded on him furiously.

“Now, Tom Stevens, you stop talking about her as if she was dead! She’s not! I heard Sue tell Len that Bart give her a fifty-fifty chance. And that’s just about all Miss Doc would need—a fifty-fifty chance. She’s a fighter, she is!”

“She sure is!” someone else chimed in. “Pity of it is we wasn’t willing to help her fight! We could have got this place cleaned up without all this violence; and Miss Doc would still be here, looking so pretty in her white uniform and smiling so sweet and being so good to everybody.” There was a burst of weeping among the women, and the men looked away, shamed and uncomfortable.

Len stopped the jeep and jumped out almost before it stopped. He went swiftly across the compound and up the steps to the small hospital building. Inside, he opened the door to the ward, moving with cat-like quiet.

Bart stood beside the bed where Ruth tossed restlessly, muttering. Bart turned, saw Len and came tiptoeing out of the room as Sue moved forward to take his place beside the bed.

Bart closed the door and gestured to Len, who walked with him outside into the grey darkness, lit only by the lights in the hospital building.

“How is she?” Len asked hoarsely.

"Not much change," admitted Bart, and asked, "Who is this David she keeps calling for?"

Len stood rock-still, feeling as though he had stepped suddenly beneath an icy shower, and felt his heart plummeting to his heels.

"David?" he repeated, and his voice sounded thin and strained.

"She's delirious and she keeps calling for somebody named David," said Bart worriedly. "I thought maybe it might be some of her folks. Maybe we ought to get in touch with them."

Len set his teeth for a moment to steady his voice.

"She hasn't any family," he managed. "She's an only child. Her mother died when she was fourteen. Her father was a country doctor, and she used to keep house for him and help him with his patients. That's how she got the idea she wanted to be a doctor."

"If we knew who this David is and could get in touch with him, get him here, it might help, Len. She seems to think a lot of him," worried Bart.

"Yes," said Len on a thin-drawn breath. "It might help. Maybe if I call the hospital where she used to work I can find David for her."

He turned and looked down at Bart sternly.

"You think it would help her if we could get this David down here?" he demanded as though hoping for a negative reply.

"Well, I'm bound to say I think it would, Len. Seems like she's pretty crazy about him. She keeps begging him not to go away. Maybe they quar-

relled or broke up or something," Bart answered reluctantly.

Len nodded. "Then I'll call the hospital," he said grimly, and strode across the compound to the office, where there was a telephone.

Bart watched him go and sighed.

"Had to happen sooner or later, I suppose," he muttered to himself. "The fellows that are always so sure they're not going to fall in love always do sooner or later; and most times it seems they fall for a girl who's already got a man of her own."

The sun was high before Len came back to the hospital ward. Bart met him, anxious and concerned.

"She's asleep," he said softly, and added quickly, "Oh, I gave her something to make her sleep, of course. She needs rest, and that delirium was using up what little strength she had left. Did you find this David guy?"

"I did," stated Len grimly. "Rather I found out who he is and where he is. He is a former patient of hers, and he's in South America!"

Bart swore under his breath.

"I talked to the superintendent of the nursing staff, finally. They said she was Dr. Prescott's best friend and the only one likely to know anything about Dr. Prescott's private life. She told me this David guy had gone to South America and married somebody else."

"Well, the dad-blamed skunk!" Bart burst out furiously.

"My sentiments exactly," said Len grimly.

"You think we should try to get her to the nearest hospital? There's one in the county seat. We'd have to take her in a boat, of course."

"Out of the question, Len. Even I know she's not up to anything like that," said Bart swiftly. "I've had enough experience in cases like this to know that what she needs more than anything else is quiet and rest. The fever's got to run its course; you know that. And she's better off right here without being dragged around in any boat."

Len clapped a hand on his shoulder heartily.

"Sure, I know that, Bart! You're doing all anybody could do. We'll just have to wait and——" He stopped, wide-eyed, as a jeep rocketed into the compound and Father Bergstrom got out and came swiftly toward them, white-faced and anxious.

"Len, what in the world has been going on?" he gasped. "I just got back from a round of parish visits, and the Trading Post is burned to the ground, and they are hustling Walt and some of his unholy gang on the mail boat heading for the jail at the county seat, and they tell me Dr. Prescott is dying."

"She isn't, Padre—she isn't!" Len's voice was sharp and touched with anguish. "But she's in a bad way. I had just told Bart all we could do was wait—but now you are here we can pray, too!"

"Of course, Len, of course. Man's extremity is God's opportunity," Father Bergstrom told him gently, and turned to Bart. "May I see her?"

"Sure, Padre. She's asleep, but it's a drugged

sleep, and there is no danger of you awakening her. Come on," said Bart, and led the way as Len dropped down on the step and put his head in his hands.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was two days later that a powerful motor cruiser pulled in at the dock at Copeland Harbour and a woman stepped ashore. She was comfortably plump, grey-haired, efficient-looking, well dressed in a handsomely tailored suit and carrying a large suitcase and a capacious handbag. She dismissed the man who had driven the motor cruiser and walked along the dock to the town, as the man shot the motor cruiser away and back down the river to the Gulf.

Marcia Hancock stood for a moment looking about her, taking in the ruins of the trading post, the ramshackle shacks behind it, the one tree-shaded street with its decrepit-looking buildings, the shrimp-packing shed where men were moving swiftly about getting ready for the first load the shrimp fleet would bring in within another week.

A grizzled man in faded overalls and a battered hat crossed the street to Marcia and, doffing the hat with old-fashioned gallantry that did not hide the lively curiosity in his eyes, asked politely, "Can I be of service to you, ma'am?"

Marcia eyed him severely.

"I'm looking for Dr. Ruth Prescott," she said curtly.

"Well, now, ma'am, if you're a patient——"

"Heavens, man, do I look like a patient?" snapped Marcia. "I'm a friend of Dr. Prescott's;

and from what I've been hearing of the goings-on down here it's about time a friend of hers got here. Where is she?"

"Well, now ma'am, Miss Doc, she's out at the hospital at the logging camp."

"How do I get there? How far is it?"

"Oh, 'bout eight, nine miles, I'd say."

"I don't suppose there's any such thing as a taxi in this God-forsaken hole!" snapped Marcia, her nerves worn thin from the flight, the difficulty of getting transportation and a feeling that this was the last straw.

"Well, no, ma'am, we don't have much use for taxis hereabouts," answered the man, concealing his dislike for her description of the Harbour. "But if you don't mind riding in a jeep, I'd be right proud to take you out there."

"Then what are we waiting for?" demanded Marcia. "Where is this jeep? I was in the Army Nurse Corps during World War One. I doubt if you can show me a jeep I'd be unwilling or unaccustomed to riding in. Let's get going."

"Yes, ma'am," said the man, and led the way to his jeep, parked in the friendly shade of one of the giant live-oaks that bordered the town's one white, shell-paved street.

Marcia looked about her as the jeep rushed along and shook her head. Ruth, the poor soul, giving up Grace Memorial and all the brilliant promise of a future that her work held there, to bury herself in this hideous, horrible, lost place! She was appalled at the memory of the difficulty she had had in getting someone to bring her here;

at the insistence that there was only one passenger boat a week that touched here, to drop off mail and any passengers foolish enough to want to come!

She glanced at the man beside her and shivered. A rough-looking character, for sure! And she had seen nobody in her brief stay at the Harbour that had looked more prepossessing.

"Reckon Miss Doc'll be mighty glad to see somebody from home," the man suggested as he drove.

"Miss Doc?" repeated Marcia. "Is that what you call her?"

"Well, yessum," answered the man, bashfully grinning. "Y'see, we always called Dr. Ed just Doc. When we got us a woman doctor, and her so young and pretty and—well, sort of sweet, just saying Doc didn't hardly seem respectful. So folks got to calling her Miss Doc."

"I suppose it didn't occur to you just to call her Dr. Prescott." Marcia's tone was dry.

"Well, no, ma'am, I reckon it didn't. Round here, folks calls everybody by their first names. We just sort of felt like Miss Doc was a kind of—well, affectionate nickname!"

"From what I've heard about what happened here, you have a queer way of showing your affection!" Marcia snapped. "What's the truth about what happened to her? I talked to a Mr. Hudson on the telephone, but the connection was not too good, so all I could gather was that she had got herself lost somehow out in the swamp and that she had been badly hurt. What was it—

wild animals? There must be a lot of them in this awful place."

"Well, no, ma'am, it wasn't wild animals. It was mosquitoes!" admitted her driver reluctantly.

Marcia stared at him incredulously.

"Mosquitoes?" she repeated. "Are you being impertinent? How could a mosquito bite cause a serious illness?"

The man's grizzled face was touched with something faintly approaching a bitter smile.

"Reckon maybe you don't know about the kind of mosquitoes breeds out in these swamps, ma'am. Nobody could stand being out there without protection for more'n five, six hours. Not even a strong man, let alone a little bitty woman like Miss Doc."

Wide-eyed, Marcia asked, "Then how does anybody live there? The patient she was going to see, I mean?"

The man looked acutely uncomfortable.

"Well, ma'am, Miss Doc didn't go to see a patient——" he admitted reluctantly.

"Nonsense! Don't tell me she was out for a stroll, to pick wild-flowers!" snapped Marcia.

"Well, no ma'am, she was *took!*" admitted her driver awkwardly. "A fellow was—well, he was paid to take her out there and come off and leave her."

Marcia almost jumped out of the jeep in her unbridled shock and fury, and the man thankfully saw the camp ahead of them, and added hurriedly, "Len'll tell you the whole story. It ain't a pretty one and ain't none of us in the Harbour

ain't ashamed and hoping to make up to Miss Doc."

He brought the jeep to a halt, and called, "Hi, Len. Brought you some company."

Len strode across to the jeep, as the man jumped out and lifted down Marcia's suitcase and drove thankfully away.

Marcia studied Len as he came toward her, standing where she was beside her suitcase, looking somehow as formidable as the most frightened little probationer had ever seen her.

"You're Mr. Hudson? I'm Marcia Hancock," she introduced herself.

"Oh, from the hospital. Miss Hancock, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you." Said Len eagerly, and thrust out his hand.

Marcia brushed his greeting aside. "How is she? And where is she? And who's taking care of her?"

"She's here in the hospital ward and Bart is looking after her and she's better this morning. She is awake and conscious." Len delivered the answers to her questions as succinctly as she had asked them, as he guided her up the steps of the hospital and to the door of the ward.

Ruth turned her head wearily as the door opened, and then her eyes found Marcia and for a shocked, incredulous moment she could only stare, quite sure that her eyes were playing her tricks.

"Hi, baby," said Marcia, her voice low and husky with emotion as she advanced to the bed and bent and put her arms about Ruth.

"It's not true," whispered Ruth faintly. "I know it's not true. You're not really here. I'm still delirious."

Her arms crept up and about Marcia, and for a moment they clung tightly to each other and there were tears in Marcia's eyes.

"You *are* real." Ruth's voice was sharp and touched with eager delight. "Oh, Marcia, Marcia, you're really here! Oh, I'm so glad to see you Marcia, Marcia, I've been so homesick!"

Len, in the doorway, turned away as though the word had been a blow between the eyes. He did not hear Marcia's soothing, gentle words; he could hear only that small, heartbroken note in Ruth's voice.

Homesick!

He was still sunk in bitter gloom when Marcia came briskly out and looked down at him. He stood up swiftly and faced her.

"She's going to make it with banners flying," she answered the unspoken question in his eyes. "That's quite a medic you've got; I couldn't have prescribed better for her myself. Keeps a very neat chart, too. You're lucky to have him."

"Thanks, Bart will be delighted to know you approve."

Marcia grinned.

"Oh, he knows. We've had a nice little visit, after Ruth went to sleep," Marcia cut in briskly. "Now I suppose I'd better be making some sort of sleeping arrangements for myself. I don't suppose there is a hotel in that village I came through?"

"There's a very good boarding-house, where Miss—that is, where Dr. Prescott lived," said Len, and added quickly, "But we'd be honoured if you'd make use of our guest house while you are here."

Marcia's eyebrows went up.

"A guest house?" She was obviously surprised, as she swung a glance about the camp, to know there was such a thing.

"Mr. Copeland and other occasional VIPs use it when they are here," Len assured her. "Just on the chance you'd want to be as close to Dr. Prescott as possible, I'm having it put in order for you."

"Well, now, that's very kind of you," said Marcia gratefully. "I would like to be where I can spend as much time with Ruth as possible, of course."

"Then if you'll come with me." Len led the way across the compound and to a neat two-roomed cottage with a wide screened-in porch, whose door he held open for her.

Inside, a large, airy living-room, comfortably and attractively furnished, revealed an open door into an equally attractive bedroom with a neat bath. The place was in spotless order, and on the low coffee-table stood a vast glass bowl filled with camellias.

Marcia caught her breath and her eyes widened.

"What gorgeous camellias!" she cried, and bent above them, touching with a delicate, gentle finger the exquisite blossoms. "And gardenias, too!"

She turned to the black bowl on a table beside the window that held a mass of gardenias, starch-white and exquisitely fragrant against their shiny green leaves.

"Where in the world, Mr. Hudson, did you find such exquisite things?" she asked.

Len was frankly puzzled at her delight.

"Why, they grow almost wild around here, Miss Hancock," he began, and then as a pretty woman in a neat print housedress came out of the bedroom, carrying a broom and mop, he said, "Sue, Miss Hancock admires your flowers."

"Admires them? They're fantastic! I've never seen anything so lovely. Who in the world grows such marvellous camellias around here?" demanded Marcia.

Sue looked at the bowl of pink and white and rose-coloured blooms and the gardenias and asked, "You mean the japonicas and the cape jessamine, Miss Hancock? Why, everybody grows them. That is, they sort of grow themselves, along with the oleanders and the azaleas. It's easier to let them grow than try to grub them out."

Marcia stared. "Have you the faintest idea what these things cost to buy, or to grow, in Atlanta? And I wouldn't *dare* think what they would cost in the north. What did you call them?"

"Why, these," Sue indicated the camellias, "are japonicas. And that bowl by the window is Grand Duke cape jessamine. There isn't a dooryard in the whole community that doesn't have scads of them growing all over the place. Sometimes at night, when the cape jessamine is in bloom and

it's warm and there's a heavy dew, they smell so loud a body can hardly sleep."

Marcia drew a deep breath.

"I begin to understand why Ruth likes it here so much," she said. "She was always crazy about flowers. And living in a city, in an apartment, she rarely had a chance to see a great many; unless some Mrs. Gotrocks came into the hospital for a rest-cure and her friends tried to make her suite look like a florist's window."

Len said anxiously, "You said Dr. Prescott likes the place?"

Marcia looked at him, frowning.

"Well, of course she does; why else would she stay, when she could write her own ticket back at the hospital? They had great plans for her there, but—well, something happened and she felt she'd like to get away."

"Something happened!" David, of course, Len reminded himself grimly.

"Of course," Marcia assured him sternly, "now that all this has happened, I'm taking her back with me as soon as she is able to travel."

"Of course," said Len without expression.

"And now, if you'd have somebody bring in my suitcase——"

"It's in the bedroom, Miss Hancock. Could I help you unpack?" suggested Sue pleasantly.

Marcia smiled at her.

"Thanks, no. An old war-horse like me is used to doing things for herself," she smiled. "You've done quite enough. I'll just have a shower and get into something cool and catch a cat-nap. I

haven't done much sleeping since I got your call, Mr. Hudson. And afterwards, I want you to tell me everything about this whole mess. I want to know what brought it all about, and I'm sure you will be the one to tell me."

"I'll be happy to be of any possible service at any time, Miss Hancock," said Len, and followed Sue out of the guest house.

Marcia went into the bedroom and looked about her, silently approving of its comfort and attractiveness. Her eyes were thoughtful as she unpacked, hung her things away, and went into the bathroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LEN was in the office when Father Bergstrom arrived, white-faced and anxious-eyed. And hard behind him, Miss Lily sitting bolt upright in her ancient buggy, drawn by the patient old mule.

"She's doing fine," Len answered both of them at once as he came down the steps from the office. "Her friend from Atlanta, Miss Marcia Hancock, arrived a while ago and she says Bart has done everything that should have been done for her. She's going to be right as rain."

"Well, now that's the best news I've heard in a coon's age," sighed Miss Lily, and just above his breath Father Bergstrom said, "Thank God!"

He mopped his ruddy face with a handkerchief and smiled.

"You'd think by now I'd be used to the rumour factory that operates at the Harbour twenty-four hours a day! But I still get excited when I hear some very bad news—such as that Miss Doc was sinking fast and her kin-folks had been sent for!"

Marcia, immaculate in a fresh cotton frock, was coming down the steps of the guest house, and Len walked to meet her, flanked by Miss Lily on one side, Father Bergstrom on the other.

"Well, now, ma'am, I'm right proud to meet you," said Miss Lily when Len made the introduction.

"Stop talking like a swamper, Miss Lily!" Len's

voice had a faint edge to it. "She gets a big kick, Miss Hancock, out of being eccentric."

"You keep a civil tongue between your teeth, Len Hudson," snapped Miss Lily, but she smiled as her gnarled old hand gave Marcia's a firm grip.

"And Father Bergstrom, Miss Hancock," said Len, and Marcia eyed him sharply as she shook hands with him.

"Oh, yes, Ruth has written me a lot about you," said Marcia. "She seems to think a great deal of you."

"That makes me very proud, Miss Hancock. She's a dear, sweet, good child and we all love her," said Father Bergstrom.

"What happened to her proves that, I suppose." Marcia's tone was dry but it held a sting that brought colour to the cheeks of all three.

"Now, look here, Miss Hancock, you can't blame us for what happened," Miss Lily began sharply.

"Can't I?" asked Marcia sweetly. "Well, I've had only the most garbled accounts of just what *did* happen, and who caused it to happen. I'm waiting to hear a coherent and honest account."

"Which I shall give you, Miss Hancock, if you will permit me." Len's tone was cold and angry.

"Permit you? My dear Mr. Hudson, I shall insist on it," Marcia told him firmly, "as soon as I check up and see how Ruth is now."

"She's still asleep, Miss Hancock," Len told her. "I had hoped you would do me the honour of having dinner with me, and I hope, Padre, you and Miss Lily can stay also."

"Why, thanks, Len, I'd enjoy it," said Father Bergstrom.

"Thank you kindly, Len, so would I!" Miss Lily chimed in.

"Cookie's been working ever since Miss Hancock arrived to get a dinner ready for her that he hopes, she will enjoy, and it's about ready, that is, if you are, Miss Hancock?" suggested Len politely.

"Ready? I don't wish to be vulgar, but I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," Marcia assured him vigorously.

Len laughed as he guided them toward the cookhouse.

The large room was empty, the tables bare except for a small one at the end of the room. It was garnished with an immaculate tablecloth and a bowl of roses and white camellias, and places had been set for two. But as Len guided Miss Hancock to it, with Father Bergstrom and Miss Lily following, the cook, an enormous man wearing a huge chef's cap and a voluminous white apron, peered out from the kitchen and came on the run, beaming joyously, to lay two more places.

"Hello, Joe," said Father Bergstrom. "I hope Miss Lily and I aren't inconvenient guests."

"Oh, no, Padre, I got vittles enough for a regiment," boasted Joe happily. "Howdy, Miss Lily. I had one of the boys take your mule out of the buggy and feed him."

"That was neighbourly of you, Joe! Thank you," said Miss Lily elegantly, seating herself as Father Bergstrom held her chair.

Joe served the dinner, and Marcia ate with a hearty, unashamed appetite, which Joe noted with delight.

"I have never eaten such fish!" she told him when he was clearing the table. "You're a marvelous cook, Joe!"

"I'm obliged, ma'am—and thank you. Best thing 'bout that fish was it was fresh! It was still swimmin' in the bayou this morning," said Joe happily. "Len, he said we ought to have fried chicken for a guest like you. But I figgered city folks has fried chicken a heap; they don't get fresh-caught fish in the cities! And bein' fresh makes all the difference in the world, ma'am."

"How right you are, Joe!" Marcia smiled at him. "I'll never be able to eat fish again in a restaurant."

"Well, no, ma'am. That's fish been caught and kep' in cold storage. That plumb spiles the flavour," said Joe happily, and departed to the kitchen for dessert.

Marcia looked down at the generous slice of hot apple pie, with its thick wedge of cheese, and then at Len and shook her head.

"The charms of this place grow on one," she sighed.

"I'm sorry Joe couldn't manage a fancier dessert, but on such short notice——" Len began apologetically.

Marcia stared at him. "My dear man, that's blasphemy! There *is* no fancier dessert than an apple pie like this."

She accepted a second cup of coffee, and the

cigarette Len offered her, and raised her eyebrows toward Father Bergstrom questioningly.

"Smoke, by all means, Miss Hancock." He smiled at her. "I rather like the fragrance, though I don't smoke myself."

Miss Lily brought out an ancient corn-cob pipe, stuffed it with tobacco and leaned toward the light Len offered her. Marcia met Len's eyes, saw the twinkle and lowered her own.

Miss Lily inhaled deeply and let the smoke drift from her nostrils, with a wicked glance at Father Bergstrom.

"Now," said Marcia firmly, "let's have the whole story from the very beginning. I not only want to know what happened to Ruth but *why!*"

"Of course," said Len, and began.

Marcia listened without interruption, and when he had finished, her eyes were blazing.

"I can't tell you, Miss Hancock, how badly I feel that I was used as bait for that poor child," began Father Bergstrom, but Marcia silenced him with an impatient gesture.

"It wasn't your fault," she said quickly. "The only people I blame are those in the village who turned on her because she was trying to do what any conscientious doctor would do—but there's no point in going into all that now. It's over and done with. But of course you all understand that as soon as she is able to travel, I'll take her back with me to the hospital. You can get yourselves a new doctor—that is, if you can find one who is willing to serve you in this misbegotten back-country."

Father Bergstrom looked down at his hands folded on the table and said quietly, "I quite understand how you feel, Miss Hancock. And I think you are perfectly right in taking her away, much as I shall hate to see her go. But she is a young and lovely woman and it would not be fair to her to expect her to spend her life here among my people."

"Where she is unappreciated," began Marcia.

"Oh, but she isn't, Miss Hancock. Neither you nor she must go away with such an idea!" Father Bergstrom protested swiftly. "If you could hear the things people all up and down the bayous and in the Harbour itself are saying about her——"

"*Saying's* not enough, my dear man!" Marcia assured him sharply. "A doctor has to know that his patients and their families are willing to back him—or her, as in this case—to the limit! And these people haven't indicated any desire to do that. No, I'm sorry. My mind is made up——"

"*Yours* is," Miss Lily said dryly, her eyes meeting Marcia's indignant gaze straightly. "We haven't yet heard how Miss Doc feels. It's going to be *her* mind that's made up before she leaves us. And Miss Doc's a fighter. She's not going to quit now."

"We'll see about that," Marcia flamed indignantly.

"I reckon we will," said Miss Lily gently, and her toothless old gums were revealed in a brief, not unmirthful grin.

"Miss Hancock is quite right, Miss Lily," Len

cut in. "Of course Dr. Prescott will go. Who could blame her?"

Miss Lily glared at him.

"Now, you're not going to tell me *you* want her to go, Len?" she gasped.

"I have nothing to say about it. No one has except Dr. Prescott herself, and she will do what she thinks best," Len stated, his tone biting his words off sharply. "And of course she'll want to leave with Miss Hancock."

"Well, of course, if you're just going to set here like a bump on a log and let her get away from you," Miss Lily sniffed.

There was a moment of shocked silence, and Len, his face scarlet, stood up, thrusting his chair back.

"I'm sure you will want to see her now, Miss Hancock," he said crisply, and held her chair as she rose, a thoughtful look in her eyes as she walked beside him out of the cook-house.

Miss Lily smoked in placid silence for a moment, and then she looked at Father Bergstrom, who was watching her, a twinkle in his eyes, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"It's just a sin, Padre, the way these young people throw their happiness away, isn't it?" she observed at last out of her deep thought.

"That's a rather profound thought, Miss Lily, and one I'm afraid I don't follow," he said gently.

"Oh, fiddle-faddle!" snapped Miss Lily. "You know perfectly well Len's plumb stomp-down wild about Miss Doc; and I'm thinking she's right fond of him. But he's just going to stand back

and let her walk away from him! I'd like to bang his head against a good stout brick wall!"

"Now, you listen to me, Miss Lily." There was an unwonted sternness in his voice. "I know how you like to meddle. But you keep your hands off in this, do you hear me? You let those two alone!"

Miss Lily stared at him through the odorous smoke of her old pipe, her eyes elaborately innocent, her whole manner one of well-simulated astonishment.

"Why, Padre," she protested. "How you do talk! Why, what could *I* do to bring those two together?"

"Probably nothing," Father Bergstrom assured her flatly. "But you might easily—and *innocently*, I trust—do something to keep them permanently apart! So you do as you are told—*let them alone!* Do you hear me?"

"Oh, sure, I hear you Padre!" said Miss Lily sweetly.

"And do you promise?"

She looked up at him innocently.

"Promise what, Padre?" she asked like the smallest and most stupid of his Sunday school pupils.

"Promise not to interfere in any way whatsoever between Miss Doc and Len!"

"Oh, that!" Miss Lily dismissed the thought with a wave of her brown, claw-like old hand that held her pipe. "Oh, sure I'm not going to interfere. Why, Padre, how could I? I wouldn't know what to do or how to start!"

Father Bergstrom looked down at her for a

long moment, and then he sighed and shook his head.

"Eccentricity, thy uses are many and thy abuses are even more multifold," he said dryly, and left the cookhouse.

Miss Lily sat on for a long moment, and then she chuckled.

Joe came out of the kitchen carrying a large package neatly wrapped in brown paper.

"There was some scraps I thought maybe your cats might like, Miss Lily," he told her.

Miss Lily beamed at him as she reached eagerly for the large, unwieldy package.

"Well, now, Joe, that's real neighbourly of you!" she thanked him warmly. "I'll see you get a batch of kittens——"

"Well, thanks, Miss Lily, but we've still got a batch of kittens," Joe assured her hastily. "A batch of kittens twice a year, as a matter of fact. Seems like sometimes when I'm out back cleaning fish I'm up to my knees in cats! Thanks just the same."

Miss Lily grinned at him.

"I know, Joe," she admitted. "Sometimes I wonder when people talk about rabbits multiplying so fast; why, cats begin where rabbits leave off."

"Yes, ma'am, that they do," Joe agreed, and grinned back at her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"HERE, here, where do you think you're going?" demanded Marcia a couple of mornings later when she came into the small hospital ward to find Ruth up and getting dressed. "Who said you could get up?"

Ruth chuckled. "I did!" she said firmly. "After all, I'm a doctor. I know when I've stayed in bed long enough. And I've got to get back to my patients."

A shadow touched her face briefly and she added half under her breath, "If they'll let me."

"If you're silly enough to want to, they'll let you," said Marcia dryly. "You're a heroine in their eyes, and they are ready to kill the fatted calf and welcome you back with open arms. Though, of course, you are only going to pass through the hideous little squalid village and step aboard the mail boat."

"Are you out of your mind? I'm going to do nothing of the sort," protested Ruth swiftly.

"You're going back home with me!"

"Marcia, Marcia, you can't boss me around." Ruth was laughing as she hugged Marcia and turned back to the small mirror above the washstand to put on enough make-up to disguise, if not quite conceal, the fading welts of the mosquito bites.

Marcia was silent for a moment, studying her.

And then she spoke so quietly that for a moment Ruth scarcely realized what she was saying.

"You're really crazy about the guy, aren't you?"

Ruth caught her breath and stood very still for a moment, the hand that held her lipstick quivering for an instant before she could control herself to turn and face Marcia, elaborately surprised.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she demanded.

"Not what—but whom?" Marcia corrected her dryly. "And don't try to kid me. This is Marcia, your old sidekick, remember? You never could fool me worth a darn. I'm talking about this tall, dark and devastating Len Hudson, of course. You're in love with him."

A burning colour crept into Ruth's face and she tried valiantly to meet Marcia's shrewd eyes but could not.

"I suppose you are planning to marry him and settle down in this outpost of civilization and there's nothing I can do to stop you," admitted Marcia grimly.

Ruth turned back to the mirror, the colour still high in her face.

"It's polite to wait until you're asked before you agree to marry a man," she reminded Marcia.

"Oh, he'll ask you—that is, if he can get over you raving about David while you were delirious," Marcia assured her.

Ruth gasped and dropped the lipstick, whirling about to face Marcia, wide-eyed.

"Oh, Marcia, I didn't!" she wailed.

"How else would I be here? You were yelling

your little head off for David; and Len, being the strong, silent type that wants the girl he loves to have whatever will give her happiness, called the hospital. I understand getting Long Distance to Atlanta from here is quite a chore. He thought David was one of the hospital staff; eventually, because everybody in the hospital knew I was your closest friend, they put the call through to me. I told him who David was—and then demanded my vacation immediately. What Ellen Lindstrom will do to my student nurses while I'm gone I hate to think; anyway, I rushed down here. And that's how it all came about."

"Oh," Ruth wailed, and hid her face behind her shaking hands.

"I don't suppose Len realizes that people in delirium say the darnedest things and yell for people they rarely ever think of in their saner moments—oh-ho, that's breakfast. Come along. You'll feel better after you've had some coffee," Marcia said briskly as the clamour of an iron-tongued bell rang throughout the compound.

"Oh, I can't face Len!" whispered Ruth.

"Don't be an idiot. Of course you can. And anyway, he may not be here. He's pretty busy in town these days. I hear him and his gang leaving about daybreak, and it's usually after dark before they come back." Marcia comforted her.

But as they went down the steps of the hospital building, Len was just driving into the compound. As he saw Ruth he leaped out of the car and came running across to her, his brown face alight.

"Hi, this is wonderful!" His eyes were ardent

and eager. "I hadn't dared hope you'd be up this soon. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful!" Ruth assured him, her colour high, her eyes shying away from the hunger in his. "I have marvellous recuperative powers and I've been beautifully taken care of and I'm very grateful to you."

"Don't talk nonsense," Len interrupted shortly, and then his manner altered and he was polite, courteous, the hospitable host. "I could hear Joe ringing the bell way down the road, so suppose we let him give us some breakfast."

As they crossed the compound Ruth looked about her, puzzled.

"Where is everybody? And the place is so quiet—aren't the men working?" she asked.

"Oh, sure, but they're working in town until you are well," said Len, and smiled down at her. "Bart felt you needed quiet as much as medication."

"Oh, but you shouldn't have let me disrupt the whole place," she protested.

"No?" Len met Marcia's eyes and his own colour deepened. "I'd say you'd done a lot more than disrupt the camp; you've just about turned the whole community upside down and you're never going to be forgotten! That's for sure!"

Ruth stumbled on the steps to the dining-hall.

"They hate me that much?" she whispered faintly, her eyes bleak.

"Hate you, darling?" Len gasped. "I'm a clumsy-spoken fool! Hate you? They love you! They just about worship you! You jarred them out

of their complacency, their acceptance of Walt and his shenanigans, and of conditions in the Flats! Oh, I forgot—you don't know what has happened while you've been ill, do you?"

Ruth made a little despairing gesture.

"Nobody tells me anything!" she protested. "For goodness' sake, what happened?"

So while Joe brought crisp waffles and honey and a tall pot of coffee to them at the table, and while Marcia looked on, listening but saying nothing, her eyes switching from Ruth's absorbed, intent face to Len's, he told her of the destruction of the Trading Post; of Walt's departure for the jail at the county seat; of the mass meeting held by the Harbour people after Walt had gone off under guard.

"So now my boys are building a new Trading Post," Len finished. "Because, of course, the Harbour has to have one. And I'm putting Lafe Macklin in as manager, and making it possible for him to pay for the Post out of its profits so that in a few years it will belong to him."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Ruth cried eagerly. "Lafe's the perfect man for such a job. He knows the squatters; he knows the value of their hides and pelts and of their fishing. Oh, now, maybe Maude will give up fighting Cathy and Lafe, and they can get married and 'live happy ever after'."

Len smiled warmly at her.

"Maude's a changed woman these days," he smiled. "In fact, when you see what's taken place in the Harbour, you won't believe you've been gone only a little more than a week. People can

accomplish a great deal when they're all working together in harmony for the common good."

"I know Father Bergstrom is happy!"

"He wears a perpetual smile that buttons in the back, like his clerical collar," Len agreed.

Marcia pushed back her plate and stood up.

"You two sit here and gossip," she suggested briskly. "I have to pack, so I'm sure you'll excuse me."

Joe hovered with fresh coffee, begging to supply them with more food, but neither would accept more. When he had gone, they sat in an uneasy silence for a moment, and then Len looked at her.

"I suppose you and Miss Hancock will be taking the mail-boat tomorrow," he said quietly.

"I want Marcia to spend a few days with me and meet some of the people in the Harbour, and I'd love to have Father Bergstrom show us around a bit," Ruth answered, and did not quite meet his eyes. "I want her to know why I'm happy here."

His hand clenched tightly before he could steady his voice.

"You are staying?" he asked, not at all sure he had understood her correctly.

"If my patients will let me," she answered quietly.

"Let you? Why, darling——" He bit off the word as though hoping she had not heard it; but she had, and it had curled warm and sweet in her heart and lit a glow in her eyes. "I mean, they'd be down on their knees with gratitude and joy if

they knew you forgave them and were willing to stay."

Ruth said happily, "Then that's settled."

Len was silent for a moment, and when he looked up at her, his mouth was a thin, bitter line.

"We haven't the right to ask you to stay," he began.

"Now, look," protested Ruth with a slightly unsteady gaiety, "you and I had all that out when I first came—remember? It seems like years and years ago, but it was really only two or three months, wasn't it? Anyway, if you're trying to get rid of me, you're wasting your time."

"I'd never want to get rid of you, darling," said Len, and this time he made no effort to control the word, or the fervour in his voice. "I think I died a little when Miss Hancock announced that she was taking you away with her. But I couldn't blame her. I knew she was right. We'd treated you shamefully here."

"You hadn't, Len!"

"I couldn't. Because I love you," he said simply.

Dewy-eyed, her soft mouth tremulous, she smiled.

"Do you, Len? I'm so terribly glad. Because you see, I love you, too!"

For a stunned, incredulous moment he could scarcely believe that he had really heard that.

"Ruth, my darling—oh, my darling!" he whispered, and his hand reached for hers and held it tightly. "But this David?"

Her hand curled warmly in his and there were tears beneath the smile in her eyes.

"Darling, David is a man I once knew; I was silly enough to believe I was in love with him," she said simply and honestly. "But you see, I'd never been in love before, so I didn't know. I thought it was love until I came here and met you and knew what being in love really means."

Len said huskily, "But Bart said you were calling for him."

"My dearest, people in delirium always say the darnedest things." Her laugh was tremulous and very sweet. "I've heard perfectly charming women, refined and gentle-spoken ladies—use the most horrible profanity when they are delirious. Coming out from under an anaesthetic you sort of dredge down beyond your oldest memories. I suppose your conscious mind is sort of out for lunch! So your subconscious gets in its licks! That's the way it was with me. I hadn't thought of David in months; so of course the minute I became delirious his was the first name my subconscious mind came up with."

"Well, thank the Lord for that!" Len breathed out a long, held breath.

"Didn't Marcia tell you David is happily married and very busily at work somewhere in South America?" asked Ruth curiously.

"Well, yes, but I wasn't sure that would make you forget him," admitted Len, and smiled ruefully. "When you woke up and saw her, you cried out that you'd been homesick. That, on top of your calling for David, convinced me that I hadn't a chance in the world with you. Of course, I'd never felt that I deserved one."

Ruth leaned toward him, framed his strong brown face between her hands, and set her mouth on his in a kiss of such ineffable sweetness that Len caught his breath. Then he was on his feet, holding her closely in his arms, their mouths clinging as their arms clung.

Joe, peeping in from the kitchen, turned happily away, and attacked the breakfast dishes with such vigour that a cup crashed to bits on the floor. But neither Ruth nor Len heard the small crash, for they were locked tight in a world all their own in which they could hear nothing but the mad, sweet tumult of their hearts in perfect unison.